


'Fierce, gripping fantasy' ADRIAN TCHAIKOVSKY

THE HOUSE OF SACRIFICE



The third Empires of Dust novel

ANNA SMITH SPARK

Anna Smith Spark

The House of Sacrifice

Аннотация

A powerhouse grimdark fantasy of bloodshed, ambition, and fate, *The House of Sacrifice* is the thunderous conclusion to Anna Smith Spark's *Empires of Dust* trilogy, which began with *The Court of Broken Knives*. Hail Him. Behold Him. Man-killer, life-stealer, death-bringer, life's thief. All are bound to Him, His word is law. The night coming, the sudden light that makes the eyes blind, Golden one, shining, glorious. Life's judgement, life's pleasure, hope's grave. Marith Altrasyr has won. He cut a path of blood and vengeance and needless violence around the world and now he rules. It is time for Marith to put down his sword, to send home his armies, to grow a beard and become fat. It is time to look to his own house, and to produce an heir. The King of Death must now learn to live. But some things cannot be learnt. The spoils of war turn to ash in the mouths of the Amrath Army and soon they are on the move again. But Marith, lord of lies, dragon-killer, father-killer, has begun to falter and his mind decays. How long can a warlord rotting from within continue to win? As the Army marches on to Sorlost, Thalia's thoughts turn to home and to the future: a life grows inside her and it is a precious thing – but it grows weak. Why must the sins of the father curse the child? A glorious, ambitious and bloodily brilliant conclusion that threads

together a masterful tapestry of language and story, and holding up a piercing reflection on epic fantasy – and those who love it.

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THE HOUSE OF SACRIFICE
Book Three of The Empires of Dust
Anna Smith Spark



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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my mother.

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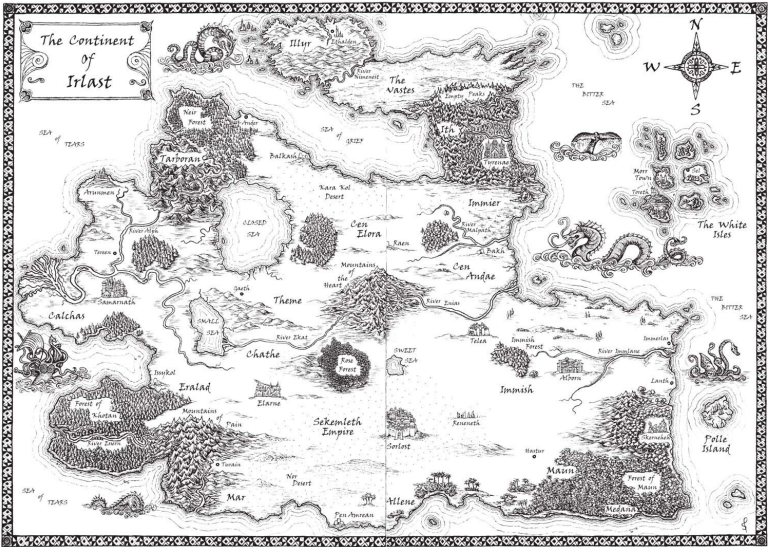
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PART ONE

Chapter One

Hail Him. Behold Him.

Wolf lord, lord of carrion,

Joy to the sword that is girt with blood.

Man-killer, life-stealer, death-bringer, life's thief.

King-throned, glorious His rule:

The sea-eaten shore, the stones of the mountains,

The eagles, the fleet deer, the wild beasts,

Men in their cities, rich in wisdom,

All are bound to Him,

His word is law.

With bloody hands He governs,

Sets His rule and His measure,

A strong tree, a storm at evening,

The sea rising up to swallow a ship.

The night coming, the sudden light that makes the eyes blind,

The floodtide, the famine, the harrowing, the pestilence.

King and Warrior.

Golden one, shining, glorious.

Life's judgement, life's pleasure, grave of hope.

The city of Ethalden, that is the most beautiful place on all the black earth of Irlast. Its towers are made of pearl and silver. Its walls are solid gold. It stands on a great plain of rich grassland, on the banks of the river Jaxertane that flows wild down to the

cold dark endless sea. It is a jewel beyond comparing. The glory of all the world. Wondrous thing! Look upon it and be blinded, dazed by its magnificence, fall upon your knees, worship, marvel, worship. Oh you who are nothing, you who are but maggots, crawling pitifully in the bitter dust. Kneel and give thanks, rejoice that you have lived to see it, that such brilliance was raised in this blessed era of the world's end.

Perfection is built here! Kneel, kneel, cry out in terror, turn away your eyes from its radiance! Its streets are paved with marble. Its palaces are ivory and white glass. Its bells ring out in music, the air is filled with perfumes, the river runs clear, the corn grows golden, the trees are heavy with sweet fruit. Treasure houses stacked with riches. Wealth beyond mortal ken. Numberless are its herds, its flocks, its swift horses; its people dress in silks and satins, its women beautiful as goddesses, its men strong as giants, in their eyes is the light of knowledge and power over all things.

Its foundations are living bodies, flesh putrefying, bones cracking beneath its weight. Its mortar is tears and blood. At its heart there stands a palace of desolation, built in honour of a mighty king.

Such a king ...

You think, do you, that he would have died somewhere, in the desert, on the shores of the White Isles, in the ruins of Ethalden, if I had not saved him? That none of this would have been? You think, do you, that without him the world would be at peace? If

he died, do you think that there would be no war, no cruelty no murder, no pain, the world would be a good and loving place? ‘Why do we do this?’ I asked him once. And he looked out across the world that we have made, and did not speak. ‘If not me,’ he said at last, ‘then perhaps someone else.’

My own city of Sorlost they say has been brought low by killing violence. We did not do that. ‘The people of Sorlost deserved it,’ you will say. ‘Child killers. Blood-sodden. Their city is based on murder, go there, Thalia, send Marith your husband there to punish them.’

The people of Sorlost are wise. They merely make visible what all the world is based on.

Take the bread your children are eating, send them to bed hungry, give the bread instead to the starving poor.

No?

In Sorlost, at least, they do not lie. In Ethalden, our tower built on human suffering, we do not lie.

Osen Fiolt is a bad man, for following him, for doing as he orders, for being his friend. Osen wants power and wealth, does not care where it comes from. Oh, yes. I wish Osen was not his friend. But I am worse, because I married him? Because I live my life? Because I do not stick a knife into his throat? To me, he has always been kind and loving. To me, he is a good man. As for the rest – I turn my eyes away from it, as we all do. Refugees and beggars stagger across the world, men, women, children, their tears are a drowning flood: what do you do? What more can be

expected of me? Should I be better than anyone else is?

It grieves me, yes, I weep over it, what we have come to, what the world is.

In a different life ...

In a different place ...

There is no different life. There is no different place. There is here and now, there is what I have, what I can be, what I can do.

Kill him? Oh, it is rather too late for that, is it not? Leave him? Why should I do that? Because it would be a better thing than staying with him? Because I should suffer, for marrying him? Because he has done harm to others, and thus I should not find pleasure in his love? Because he is a bad man and so I should not love him, because you do not want me to love a bad man because I am – what? Because I should be better than that? If I ran away to the other side of Irlast, dressed myself in sackcloth and ashes, did penance with aching hands, tended the starving, kissed the wounds of the sick – so what? So what?

You do not expect Osen to leave him, renounce all of this. You do not expect this of any of his friends.

You will still say, perhaps, that I am a fool, lovestruck, blinded, his victim, that I would flee from him if I could, because ...

We sit together, talk, laugh, argue, hold great feasts and parties, walk in the gardens, ride in the fields, sit quietly to read. I am trying to improve his taste in poetry. He is introducing me to the Pernish stories of his childhood. But I should not love him,

because ...?

We march onwards, an army like a storm, like the clouds rushing over the sun. The world trembles. The men in their bronze armour sing the paean, hold their heads high, smile as they march. The world bows before us. Every soldier here in our army, they are as mighty as kings. Life is good, life is joyous for them.

That is not a good thing, no. It would be better indeed if we were all to be men of peace.

But we are not men of peace.

I will not be blamed for living my life.

Chapter Two

Marith Altrersyr, King of the White Isles and Ith and Illyr and Immier and the Wastes and the Bitter Sea, King of All Irlast, **Ansikanderakesis Amrakane**, Amrath Returned to Us, King Ruin, King of Shadows, King of Dust, King of Death
His Empire

Marith Altrersyr the King of All Irlast stood on the brow of a hill looking across towards the city of Arunmen.

It was still early morning. Soft pale light, pink and golden. In the valley the scent of wood smoke, the smoke rising to blur the light. Birds wheeled in the sky, turning, twisting like outstretched fingers. Reminded him of Thalia's hair. They called harsh and lonely. Hungry, cold, fragile things. Moved in the sky turning and turning. Their cries muffled by the ringing of a blacksmith's hammer. Wheeled and called, flew off to the east.

The sun caught their wing beats. Black and white in the sky. The hammer rang out loudly. Then silence. Waiting.

Waiting.

'Marith!'

Marith turned. Looked down the hillside. Osen Fiolt, the Lord of Third Isle, the Lord of the Calien Mal, Death's Lieutenant, Captain of the Army of Amrath. His best friend. Osen rode up towards him. A young man, dark and handsome but for the scar on his face.

‘Marith! They’re waiting for you!’

Marith rubbed his eyes. From across towards the city came a distant rumble. A flash of white fire against the city walls. The birds rushed back overhead, black and silver. Singing. He took a long drink from the bottle at his belt. Watched the course of the birds across the sky.

Ah, gods.

Osen pulled up his horse beside him. ‘Beautiful morning for it.’

‘I think it might snow.’

‘Do you? A bit early in the year for snow?’

‘Thalia would like it.’

‘The men wouldn’t.’

‘No. No, I suppose not. But it would be beautiful. Snowfall. Don’t you think?’

Osen said, ‘Are you ready, then?’

Looked back over the morning landscape. The hammer rang again. Smell of wood smoke. Another distant flash of light against the city’s walls. Dark cloud twist of birds, rising afraid.

He drank from the bottle. ‘I suppose I’ll have to be.’

Swung himself up onto his horse. A white stallion, saddled in red and silver, red ribbons plaited in its tail, gold on its hooves, sharp bronze horns decorating its head. Osen brought his own horse to fall in beside him. Reached out and their hands touched.

‘Third time lucky?’

‘Third time lucky.’

They kicked their horses into a gallop.

‘Amrath!’ Marith shouted. ‘Amrath and the Altrersyr! Death!

Death!’

Before him, on the plain, the Army of Amrath stood to attention. Bronze armour. Bronze swords. Long iron-tipped ash-wood sarris spears. Their helmets plumed in red horse-hair. Dark-tempered bronze over staring eyes. Horses armoured and masked, heads like skulls, blinkered, blind to everything. Red standards fluttering. Raw and bloodied. Dripping screaming weeping over the army’s lines. In the sky above, two dragons circled. Red and black. Green and silver. Huge. Shadowbeasts danced around the dragons, formless faceless long-clawed.

The Army of Amrath.

Waiting.

All of them.

Waiting for him.

Marith rode along the front of his army, Osen at his side. He drew his sword. Raised it, shining, the morning sun flashing on the blade. White metal, engraved with rune signs. The rune letters burned in the sunlight. The ruby in the sword’s hilt glowed scarlet. Blue fire flickered down the length of the blade.

Henket. Mai. Eth. Ri.

Death. Grief. Ruin. Hate.

He shouted to the men, his voice loud as the sword’s light. ‘Soldiers of Amrath! My soldiers! Twice now, this city has resisted us! Resisted us and betrayed us! Now, today, it will fall!’

An explosion shattering against the black walls of the city. White fire, silent as maggots. White fire, silent, and then screams. The wind caught his cloak and sent it billowing out behind him. Dark red, scab-coloured, tattered into a thousand shreds of lace. Dried blood flaked off it. Fresh blood oozed off it. It stank of blood and shit and rot and smoke. He wore his silver crown but was otherwise bareheaded, the morning sun bright on his black-red hair. His skin like new-spun silk, smooth and perfect, gleaming. His grey eyes soft like a child's eyes. Soft pale grey like moths.

‘Destroy it!’ Marith shouted to his army. ‘Destroy it! Tear it down! Let nothing be left alive!’

‘Amrath!’ the army screamed back at him. ‘Amrath and the Altrersyr! Death and all demons! Death! Death! Death!’

Columns of soldiers began to move forward. Siege engines hurled rocks running with banefire. Mage fire, white and silent. Dragon fire, glowing red. The beat of war drums. Clamour of trumpets. Voices chanting out the death song. Slowly slowly moving forward. Slow and steady, the drums beating, fire washing over them, rocks and banefire loosed from war engines on the city's walls. Falling dying, trampled by those behind them. Slowly steadily marching on. Slow long ranks marching towards the city. Destroy it! Destroy it! The only thought in all the world in all their minds. The dead zone between the city and the encircling army. Broken bones and ruin and dead men. Banefire. Mage fire. Dragon fire. War drums and war trumpets.

And now, loud and urgent, the thump of battering rams against the city's gates. War ships in the harbour, grappling. A storm rising. Towering huge dark waves.

'Amrath! Amrath! Death!'

Waves of men breaking against the city. Waves of water. Waves of fire. Waves of death and pain.

Snow began to fall.

White flakes caught in Marith's shining hair.

'Break it! Break it! Down! Down!'

The ram smashed into the Tereen Gateway. Again. Again. Again. A tree trunk thicker than a man's armspan, carved at its end into a dragon-head snarl. Covered with bloody ox-hides, to keep it from catching fire. Obscene. Comic. Pumping away in out, in out, in out, steaming dripping bloody battering pounding rapping iron wood meat. Three huge siege engines hurling rocks and banefire. Machines on the walls hurling rocks and banefire back at them.

Marith circled his horse, making it rear up. Gilded hooves sharp like knives.

'Break it down! Now!'

A shower of boiling sand poured down from the battlements. Soldiers collapsed screaming, clawing at their skin. Inside their armour, burning. In their hair. In their mouths and eyes. The bloody hides on the ram hissed. Cheers from the Arunmenese defenders above.

The ram swung again. Off to the left, a blinding white flash

and a dragon's roar. The gate groaned. Splintering. Shadowbeasts gathered, a clot in the air. Shapes twisting, forming, dissolving, huge shapeless dark beating shrieking wings. They dived together, claws and wing beats, jaws opening faceless, clawed limbs tearing down the stones of the wall.

'Now! Now! Break it down!' Marith's horse reared, trampling snow. Red-hot sand showered down around him. His horse screamed in pain. Fire arrows thudding into the battering ram. His soldiers' bodies piling on the ground.

The sky roared at him. A thousand screaming raging mouths. Another flash. The dragon howled. The men fell back shrieking in fear. White light rising up before him. Spear-shape. Cloud-shape. Shining. Grass-green eyes opening, staring; hands reaching for him, numberless beyond counting, and in every hand a sword with a blade of silver light.

God thing. Life thing. A demon conjured up to protect the city. The great high holy god of Arunmen whose temple was gold and green bronze.

Bastard thing. Twice now, it had beaten him off.

'Get the gate open! Now! Now! The ram!'

His sword was shrieking in his hand. Red jewel at the hilt winking at him. Glittering. Red light like the red light of the Fire Star. The King's Star. His star. *There's your star, Marith, and there's mine. Look!* A red jewel, the sword forged for him in the Tower of the Eagle, back before he was truly king, forged in blood and ashes, forged to look like the sword the first Amrath

had owned. He'd had a sword before, once, with a red jewel in its hilt, he had named it Sorrow, and this sword he had named Joy.

Marith charged his enemy. So tiny, a man shape on horseback, throwing himself headlong towards this towering raging maelstrom of light. Behind him the ram started. Drumming on the gateway. Break it down! Break it down! His siege engines loosed all together. The machines on the walls showering sand and rocks and banefire back at his men. Mage fire. Dragon fire. Dying.

Marith King Ruin met the light god with a crash.

All his vision was silver.

Slurred. Like being underwater. All the movements just a moment too slow. Cool and soft around him. It felt like Thalia's skin. A hundred sword blades meeting his sword stroke. A hundred sword blades cutting at him. Grass-green eyes closed and opened. All staring. Sad sad eyes: they looked like the eyes of an old man. Marith fought it. Cut at it. A sword and a hand fell away and another grew up in their place. He cut it again, again a hand falling, again another hand growing up. Swords struck back at him. Glanced off him. Warded them off, didn't feel them, and then a blade got down into the meat of his shoulder, and a wound opened up dry and ashy, and he hurt. He lunged deep into its body. The centre of it, white silver light swallowing him. His horse was screaming. His horse was dead. It reared and kicked at the light surrounding it. Gilded hooves coming down. The grass-green eyes closed and opened. Countless silver swords stabbed

at him.

Bastard stupid thing. Twice now, it had beaten him.

The battering ram thudded against the Tereen Gateway. Trumpets rang for an assault on the walls. Voices shouting: 'Ladders! Ladders! Up there! Get moving!' Soldiers rushing up them. Fast with knives clutched in their teeth. A ladder falling backwards, soldiers falling from it dying. Spiralling down off the ladders screaming in a cloud of red-hot sand.

Snow, falling over everything. White snow, black ash, silver fire, red blood. Snowflakes silent and soft as feathers. Muting the sound.

Memory of snow falling, the day he killed his father. White blossom, falling like snowflakes, as they cheered him entering the cities of half the world.

Thalia would like the snow, he thought.

The light god wounded him. Hard, raw pain in his arm, making him almost drop his sword Joy. He cut off hands and swords and they grew up stronger, swords stabbing. Grass-green eyes staring at him. Twice, this damned thing had defeated him. Twice, his soldiers had been forced back. Fire hissed on the bloody ox-hides. The ram beginning to burn. Men dying. Men rushing up to replace them pounding it hard at the gate. The ladders trembling, swaying like bird-legs, another going over, soldiers falling, one soldier falling was burning, fell like a star. Soldiers stumbling blinded by red-hot sand.

Osen's voice shouting furiously, 'Break it! Break it! Destroy

it! Now!

‘Amrath! Amrath!’

White fire washing over the battering ram. The ox-hides smoking, burning, men dying, men rushing up wounded and bloody to take their place. The dead horse reared and kicked at the light god. Knife-sharp gilded hooves. Marith cut and hacked at the light god. Swords falling. Swords cutting him. Grass-green eyes opened and closed.

The gate shattered open beneath the beating of the ram. The Army of Amrath surged forward. Trampling their dead and dying. Fighting each other to be first through the gate. A trumpet rang out triumphant. Cheering. Screaming.

‘Breech! Breech!’

‘Amrath!’

‘Breech! Breech!’

The light god roared in fury. Swords and hands ripping at Marith. Marith smashed back at it.

Shouts and cheering turning to screams as the machine on the walls showered down burning sand. The shadows rose up to destroy it. A bright white flash of mage fire sent them burning back. The machine loosed more sand, shimmering as it came down.

‘Breach! Breach!’

‘In! Now!’

‘In! In!’

The Army of Amrath surging in through the gateway. Through

the shower of sand falling. Through blasts of white and silver mage fire. Through shuddering falling walls. Soldiers rushing up the ladders. Up onto the battlements. Trying to get to the war engines. Mage fire crashed over them. Burning. More and more rushing up behind.

Voices shouting the war song: 'Death! Death! Death!'

Marith hacked at the light god. Grass-green eyes staring at him. Numberless hands and sword blades. Swirling silver all around him, washing him, cool and soft. He hacked like hacking at a tree trunk. Ignored the swords cutting him. Nothing could harm him. Remember that! They cut him and they hurt him but there was nothing. Dry ash wounds, blood like rust, nothing to bleed, nothing to die. Like a dried-up river. Dry dead dust. A famine. He slashed at the thing's shining light, cut it into pieces, over and over, all the hands and the swords cutting him. Grass-green eyes staring at him. He cut them. Destroying them. Hammering down his sword blade. Over and over and over and over. The dead horse reared and kicked at it. Bit at it with yellow teeth. Cut and cut and cut.

A burst of light. White and silver. Brighter than sunlight. The snow shining with every colour of the rainbow. Light reflected in every soldier's eyes.

Scream like glass and bells ringing. A thousand rushing shooting stars.

White light. Burning. White shining blazing sparks of fire. Cut and cut and cut and cut.

Screamed.

Screamed.

Gone.

Twice, it had defeated him.

Third time lucky, indeed.

Marith drew his breath. Patted his horse to thank it.

Charged after his soldiers through the ruins of the gate.

King Ruin. King Death. Such joy and such wonder. The one true perfect thing.

Inside the Tereen Gateway was a killing ground. Rubble, rotting corpses, barricades, fires. A crude wall, too high for his soldiers to climb over, thrown up behind.

‘Hold!’ a voice was screaming. ‘Whatever comes at us! Hold! Hold!’ Gritted lines gritted teeth gritted spears, grey hopeless dead men. The last defenders of Arunmen. Marith felt almost sorry for them. Their swords and spears trembled in their hands. They knew. When he first crossed the river Alph, Arunmen had surrendered unconditionally, thrown open its gates, feasted and crowned him king. Hanged its last king from the gates of the palace as a welcome gift. Two months after they crowned him, the people of Arunmen had declared themselves a free city, massacred the garrison he’d left. Ungrateful bastards! Just because he’d been a bit tied-up in Samarnath city of towers and wretchedly difficult suicidal ‘freedom or death we shall not yield’ maniacs, they thought they could turn around and thumb their noses at him?

He charged into the line of defenders, hacking at them. An arrow thudded into his back; he felt the heat of its fires, shrugged it off, killed someone. The dead horse screamed. Its mane was burning. Delightful smell of burning hair. There were spears in his face, jabbing at him hitting out with his sword. The ruby on the hilt shining. White light rainbows on the blade. His face flushed, bloodied. Blood and dust in his hair. Beautiful. Shining like diamonds. Shining like all the stars in the heavens, like sunlight on water, beautiful perfect shining with rainbows, moon-white skin and red-black shining hair, killing them. White-silver blood-red scab rot filth death ruin screaming his men on in through the rubble of the gate. The men coming on behind him, grappling with the defenders, climbing and tearing at the inner wall.

He killed someone else. A third. A fourth. Shouts from the walls: they'd got a bridgehead up there on the battlements. A body crashed down in front of him. Helpfully took out an Arunmenese soldier rushing forward with a nasty big sword. A crash and a cheer off from the Salen Gateway. That gate too was breached. Osen and his men would be in.

'Amrath!'

'Amrath and the Altrersyr!'

'Death!'

A horseman came riding at him, the horse already maddened by the screaming stink of blood. He struck the horse with his sword and it shattered, flew apart all these dark shapes. It was

just a shadow. The rider came crashing down, the hilt of a sword in its hands, crumbled metal, crumbling away into dust, its hands were eaten away by the eaten metal. You see now, you see, even my touch is corruption, I am ruin, I am a god and after me is only death. He killed his enemies. Five, ten, twenty to a stroke. A hundred dead. A thousand. They crumbled before him, they were nothing, he is death and ruin, he cannot be harmed. Alone, he could kill them all, on and on, killing, he could stand here and kill for all eternity, every man and woman and child who walks the earth, he could kill. This is all that I am, he thought. All that I could ever be and do.

His hand moved, holding the sword. He closed his eyes. He felt things die beneath his sword strokes. Cut through them, cut the world open, they were ragged and torn apart, they looked like clouds torn ragged by the wind and the moonlight shines through them and the sky behind them is both darker and bright with light.

Smoke was rising over the city. Marith raised his face in joy as the red dragon flew overhead. A great warm wash of dragon fire. Warm soft flames caressing his face. He could feel the battering ram pounding against the Sea Gate, the storm waves smashing against the harbour. Crash as the siege engines loosed. More and more of his men coming in around him, fanning out, pushing the defenders back. The city before them burning. Dragon fire. Mage fire. Banefire. Falling from the heavens. A roar of triumph off to his left from the walls: voices shouting, hailing

him. Fighting. Killing. Pressing onwards. His men pouring in. Flowing into the city, fighting, killing, tearing it down. The red dragon came down to land. Crushed bodies: soldiers, women, children; children throwing roof tiles, firewood, fighting trying to defend the city with ragged bare hands. The dragon breathed out flames and consumed them. Children throwing roof tiles. Women with kitchen knives. Smashed the buildings of the city down over them. Burned them. Cut them open in its jaws. The shadowbeasts lifted them, dismembered them, dropped them falling in pieces spiralling to the ground. Snow falling around the bodies. Red blood. White ash. White snow. Soldiers in at every breach, fighting. Pressing forward. Over and over. Endless. Rolling climax building. Wave after wave after wave. His soldiers ripping everything apart. Dismembering everything. Opening the city up like a body. Battering it like waves on rock. Marith fighting, killing, the whole city spread before him, watching it fighting, watching it falling, watching it burn and break and yield and fall into dust. On and on his men running through the city, killing everything. The storm beating against the harbour. The siege engines loosing banefire and rock.

The defenders retreating. Their city burning. Blood running in torrents. Pulling back to their own houses. Hoping without hope that their own families might somehow be saved. The snow coming thicker. Muting sound and vision. Cold sweet silent white air. The Army of Amrath spilling over everything. Wading through the city's dying. Soaked and mired in death. That smell

it had! Heavy, sweet, honeyed tang. Breathe it in, it never goes stale. The smell of the butcher's block that is the smell of power and the illusion of living. Every death to be treasured. Hoarded. I did this. I made this.

Blood and filth and human ruin: that is the face of god. Arunmen is taken! Arunmen is fallen! And here now he is king.

Osen Fiolt and Valim Erith met him at the gates of the palace of Arunmen. Onyx towers like the city walls, high as cliffs, black as storm clouds, its roofs gold tiles but they'd stripped off the tiles to pay for their pointless futile war. Osen had a squad of men guarding it. They can have the city, Marith had told his captains, but the palace is to be kept intact for me.

'It's clear,' said Valim. 'We've been through it.' Lord Valim of Fealene Isle; a companion of Marith's father, older therefore than Marith and Osen, too cautious in his thinking but a good leader of men, as many older men are. He had been with them since the beginning of everything, had fought in every battle, had lost his son and his brother in battle, but still Marith felt something like shame around him, who had seen him as a child, been a young man armed and shining when Marith was a child staring up in awe.

Valim got down on his knees before Marith. '*Ansikanderakesis Amrakane*. My Lord King of Arunmen.'

'I was already King of Arunmen.' So unnecessary. All of this. 'Come on, then,' said Osen. 'Let's go and have a look, see what they've left us.'

‘Tell the men three days,’ said Marith. He looked at the snow falling. ‘Try and make sure they don’t burn absolutely every building down.’

Valim nodded.

‘Have they found the ringleaders?’ asked Marith.

A look of irritation. ‘We will.’

‘You hope,’ said Osen. Marith gave him a look.

They went into the palace together, Marith and Osen. Marith’s footsteps rang very loud on the tiled floor.

Hated this part, somehow. Walking through halls and corridors, walls closing around him, on and in and in. Smell of smoke. Servants’ faces. Dead faces. Dying faces. So many times, we’ve done this, he thought. But always so strange.

‘I thought Valim said it was clear,’ said Osen. He kicked a slumped body, one of their soldiers. It groaned. ‘This isn’t clear.’

They came to the throne room. Servants and nobodies in grand rich clothing, faces grey with terror, trying to protest with every fibre of their being that they’d always worshipped Marith Altrersyr as their true king. More bodies. Marith’s soldiers and the Arunmenese soldiers who had tried to fight them off.

Why? Marith thought. Why did they try to fight them off? It’s an old wooden chair.

The walls of the throne room were made of amber. Thick and drowning: Marith stared at the walls, looked through the amber like looking through water, there were flowers trapped in it, insects, encased in the walls. He put his hand on the amber

and it was almost warm. It felt like skin. Not cold, like stone. The throne on its dais: wood, twisting patterns in the grain, red canopy old and cracked and dusty, that was said to be the skin of a sea beast that a king of Arunmen had once killed. The steps of the dais were thick with gold paint.

Tasteless. Like every single bloody one of them. Power awe glory power wealth! Bloodstains on the wood that nothing could scrub out. Marith climbed the dais. Sat down on the throne.

‘The King of Arunmen!’ Everyone kneeling, Osen, the soldiers, the servants and officials of the palace who had surrendered to them, all kneeling with their faces pressed on the stone floor. Gold-coloured skin in the amber light. Like they were all yellow and sick.

Yellow light and smoky, bloody chambers. Marith closed his eyes. Panicked fear he was going to throw up.

Arunmen had surrendered to him. Made him sit here once already, king and master, all enthroned in yellow light. Filthy poxy place in the middle of sodding nowhere. No desire in him then ever to come back.

‘Marith?’

Marith opened his eyes. Osen was staring at him, everyone else still prostrate heads down, crouched beetled staring at the floor. Pile of dead bodies. Dying bodies. Valim Erith had said the place was clear. Here I am seating myself on my throne in a room full of corpses. We don’t even try to pretend it’s anything else any more.

‘Get up,’ he said. Creak of armour. Creak of old men’s bones. Some of these servants must have turned their coats three times now, from the dead king Androinidas to Marith Altrersyr to the pretender who’d rebelled against him to Marith Altrersyr again.

He said, ‘Kill these people. All of them.’

Osen tried to smile at him. ‘You need a drink and a hot bath, Marith.’

Marith took the flask from his belt, discovered it was empty. ‘I do.’

‘I sent riders. Thalia will be here in a few days, I should think, unless the snow gets much worse. So cheer up. Look, let’s go and get you clean.’ ‘*Don’t kill them,*’ he saw Osen mouth over his shoulder at his soldiers.

They went up to the king’s private rooms, up in a tower above the throne room. The bedchamber had windows of green glass, the light cool like the light beneath trees. Marith felt easier here, breathing in the green. The walls were hung with leaves and flowers, preserved by magecraft fresh and perfect as the day they were first picked. The bed had curtains of silver tissue. The ceiling was set with fragments of mage glass to mimic the stars. Three weeks, he had spent here before, when he first came to Arunmen. Kept Sun’s Height and the feast of Amrath’s birthday. Days of peace and sweet, joyous nights.

He went over to the window, pressed his face against it. His face felt so hot. Through the window he could see trees, distorted by the ripples in the glass. A hot wind rattled the window,

bringing the stink of smoke. Turned back to the room and there were bloody smear marks on the green glass window. Bloody footprints on the floor.

I remember the Summer Palace in Sorlost, burning. The smell of it. The heat of it. A column of fire, the walls were running with fire, I've never seen fire move like that, before or since. Not dragon fire, not banefire, nothing. It was like all the gods of the world were in that palace, consuming it. It moved like breath. I remember the people dying, the Emperor's guards, the servants, I have no idea how many we must have killed. The Emperor on his gold throne, with a yellow rag around his head, soiling himself. A servant girl with her face opened up like a flower, throwing herself through a window to escape. Old men pleading for mercy, cowering behind piles of tattered books. The palace walls flowed with fire, my sword was red with blood, my hands ached from killing. My whole self stripped down to killing and death.

'They're getting a bath prepared for you,' said Osen. A girl came running, offered wine in gold cups. She bowed her head to Marith. Her body leaning forward so that he could see down her dress. Sweat, running down inside her dress. Reached out and took the cup and his hand shook and the cup fell. Wine stain over the blood. The cup rolled on the floor. He stared at it. The girl stood very still.

Marith opened his mouth. Felt himself about to scream. A choked dry shriek came out of him.

'Get out,' said Osen. 'Everyone. Out. Now.'

A man who was perhaps a senior servant, the master of the bedchamber, dripping in silk and jewels, fat face fat hands, fussing about, 'The mess, My Lord, My Lord King, the mess, I'll have the girl whipped, I—'

Osen said, 'Get out. Now. Everyone.'

'You're not injured, somehow?' Osen asked when they were alone.

'Of course I'm not injured. Don't be absurd. I'm just tired.' Marith rubbed his eyes. 'Three assaults in four days. Tiring.'

A strange look on Osen's face. Osen said, 'Good.'

'Of course I'm not injured. How could I be injured?'

'I said, good. How could you be injured? I was just concerned.'

Osen knelt down, began to peel Marith's armour off him. Blood spatter, blood and gore streaming down him, flaking off him, whole bits of what had once been people, congealing in lumps, running off his skin.

'Gods, this stinks,' said Osen. He was as filthy as Marith was. Marith reached down and fumbled with the straps of Osen's armour in turn.

'Leave it. I'll do it later. The important thing is you.' Osen took his hand. 'You're shaking.'

'I'm fine.'

'This carpet is bloody ruined,' said Osen. Still struggling with Marith's armour that was stuck to him with blood. 'It'll have to be burned.'

The last time he'd been here, at Sun's Height. Kneeling on the

carpet at Thalia's feet, Thalia's face shining bronze like candles, looking down at him. Love and joy and peace.

Osen said, 'There! Gods, wretched thing.' Clatter of metal. The armour lying in blood and spilled wine. 'Let's get you next door to the bath, then. I'll get you a drink for when you're in there.'

Blink of hope. 'Hatha?'

'A bit early in the day, don't you think?'

Marith blinked. 'Please?'

'You're the king. I do as you say. But, look, maybe try to go a bit easy. Maybe?'

Marith rubbed his eyes. 'I'm fine.'

'You said. But, look: go easy. Alleen's choosing the drinks tonight. We tossed for it, who got to storm the Salen Gateway, who wussed out with the Sea Gate but got to choose the victory drinks. And you do look ... tired. So go easy beforehand, maybe? Yes? No?'

Marith rubbed his eyes. 'I'm fine.'

His legs were shaking. Osen had to help him into the bath. Voices of the servants fussing cleaning up his bedchamber. His head was aching. His whole body was aching. The bath chamber had windows of blue glass. Made his skin look blue and dead. Could hear screams. Smell of smoke, sound of fire. The girl sobbing, where she was being whipped.

Chapter Three

Four years, since Marith Altrersyr destroyed the palace of the Asekemlene Emperor of the Sekemleth Empire of the Eternal Golden City of Sorlost, carried off the High Priestess Thalia the Chosen of the Great God Tanis to be his bride, bested first his father and then his uncle in battle to claim both their kingdoms, avenged the betrayal of his ancestor Amrath in the ruins of Ethalden to be crowned King of Illyr, Amrath Returned, called all the fighting men of Irlast to his banner, set out to conquer the world.

Four years.

And most of Irlast was indeed now conquered. Cities razed. Armies broken. Kings and princes and magelords grovelling in the dust. Immier, Cen Andae, Cen Elora, Chathe with its rose trees all uprooted, the Nairn Forest a thousand miles of grey ash. The sky had been red from sunrise to sunset to sunrise, when he burned the Nairn Forest. The smoke had blocked out the sun. From the Bitter Sea to the Sea of Tears, he was king and master. Always, his power was growing. His shadow lengthening. His fortress of Ethalden was built of gold and gems and human flesh. He held court crowned in mage light and emissaries came to praise him from every corner of the world. His armies were uncountable like the grains of sand in the desert. Undefeated like the sea rising in winter. Feared like a famine when the rains fail.

Over the face of the world they ran like water and the world was drowning. Over the face of the world they ran and their coming was like night.

Marith the World Conqueror. God of war and ruin and grief and hate and vengeance. Dragonlord. Dragon kin. Demon born. Lord of Shadows. Death made manifest. Great king.

Four glorious, wonderful, perfect, joy-filled years.

Chapter Four

He was slumped in bed the next day when Osen came to tell him that the Arunmenese rebel leader had been captured.

‘Oh. Wonderful.’ Sat up. Lay down again. Oh gods. ‘He couldn’t have stayed uncaptured for another few hours? Just until my hangover went away?’

‘What did I tell you?’

‘What did you tell me?’

‘I—’ Osen shook his head. ‘Never mind. I can deal with it, if you want.’

‘No, no. I should. I want to see him.’ Bastard. Ungrateful stupid bastard. Marith thought: I left Arunmen untouched. I. Left. Arunmen. Un. Touched. And this ungrateful idiot decided to rebel against me. Which part of ‘untouched’ was so difficult for people to understand?

Managed to get up and dressed, just about. With Osen’s help. But, look, three assaults in four days. Tiring. And it was all Alleen Durith’s fault really, he had chosen last night’s drinks. Marith gulped watered wine, his hands shaking, fighting down nausea. The girl holding his cup stared at him trying not to look at him, like she was watching a man’s death. The palace staff kept sending servant girls to attend him, thin tight dresses and big whispering eyes. Send them away. One of them had almost touched his hand, carrying in his clothes. His hand tingled,

like he'd touched something dirty, couldn't wash it off. Sweat, running inside her thin silk dress.

He came back into the throne room. They'd spent all day scrubbing it clean. Sat here last night and the bodies had still been piled here, he'd seen them, his soldiers and the enemy soldiers, piled up in mounds at his feet while he feasted, he thought again: why? It's a stupid tasteless wooden chair. Mounted the steps of the dais, sat down, his legs were shaking. Curse Alleen Durith. He'd put on his red cloak, all bloody, it stank like his head hurt, it left trails of slime like slug trails on the chair. The crown of Arunmen on his head, and it was irritatingly heavy, and the previous King of Arunmen must have had a really weirdly shaped head.

All very formal. The High Lords of his empire knelt in fealty before him, kissed his hands, offered him praise and gratitude as their king and as their god. Osen Fiolt. Alleen Durith. Lord Erith. Lord Nymen. Lord Meerak of Raen. Lady Dansa Arual of Balkash. Lord Cimer the Magelord. Lord Ranene the weather hand. Lord Ryn Mathen the King of Chathe's cousin who led the allied Chathean troops. All his great High Lords, his captains, his friends, his trusted companions, the men and women upon whom he had bestowed the glory of his reign.

All nine of them.

No. That wasn't exactly fair on himself. Yanis Stansel was back in Illyr acting as regent, raising fresh troops and overseeing the final construction of Amrath's tomb. Kiana Sabryya was on

her way to join them, escorting Thalia from Tereen.

Ten. Eleven. And perhaps once he'd have been astonished to think he might count his companions as high as that. More even than the fingers of both hands! Look, look, father, look, Ti, look at me! Eleven friends!

Valim Erith said, 'Bring him in.'

Stirring, voices calling outside the doorway. 'Bring him!' A troop of guardsmen entered. A tall man chained and bound in their midst. He was naked. Dripping blood. Stinking of excrement. Hate and rage and terror on the man's face.

'My Lord King,' Valim said. 'The prisoner.'

Well, yes, obviously.

The guards dropped the man at Marith's feet.

So.

Marith looked down at him. Pale dying eyes. Refused to meet Marith's gaze.

Marith said slowly, 'I left Arunmen untouched. I granted you freedom under my suzerainty. I left you unharmed. Yet you defied me. Usurped my crown. Claimed you could destroy me. Why?'

The prisoner spat at him. A great gobbet of yellow phlegm on the gold-painted dais.

'Why?'

Clatter of iron chains. The prisoner looked up straight at Marith. Stared at him. A wild man's eyes. Pale and dying. Filled with hate. Empty croaking voice like a fucking frog: 'Filth.'

Pestilence. Poison. Better all the world died in torment, than lived under your rule.'

That's why? That's all? Marith stared at the phlegm oozing slowly down the steps of the dais. I call myself King Ruin, King of Death, King of Shadows. You think I don't know what I am?

'I am your king,' Marith said. 'The Lord of All Irlast.'

The prisoner lowered his eyes again. 'You are my king. The Lord of All Irlast. So better that I die.'

'You let a lot of your men die for you first,' said Alleen. 'And a lot of mine.' He looked at Marith. 'This is pointless. Just get it over with and kill him.'

'Better that every living thing in Irlast dies than submits to you.' Spat more phlegm. Opened his bowels and shat himself at Marith's feet. 'My soldiers were lucky, that they died before they had to look at your face.'

'They looked at our faces perfectly happily when we marched in triumphantly a few months ago,' Alleen snapped. 'Threw flowers at us, made us very welcome in every possible way, then. They were perfectly happy and alive and most of them seemed to be enjoying themselves.'

A great big feast. The city's fountains running with wine instead of water. King Marith and Queen Thalia distributing largesse in the streets. Girls wearing crowns of roses. Singing and dancing all day and all night. Yes, the people of Arunmen had seemed happy and alive and enjoying themselves. Alleen and Osen and the other generals had been virtually fighting admirers

off.

‘So why? Why?’

The prisoner stared at him in silence. Shit pooling on the marble. Phlegm dripping down the gold-painted steps. Stared. Lowered his eyes, stared at the floor.

Spat again.

‘Filth. Pestilence. Rot.’

Osen rolled his eyes at Marith. Mouthed something that might have been ‘hurry up’.

Always the same. Every few months, somewhere in his empire. Someone standing up, sword in hand, promising they could overthrow the tyrant, save the world from something it was never quite clear what. Being ruled by one man rather than another, perhaps. Overthrow the rule of evil! Freedom beckons! Kill the tyrant, throw off our chains, make me king! And all the young men and women jumping up shouting agreement, muttering prophecies, singing uplifting bloodthirsty war songs. And he’d have to break off whatever he was doing, march over with an army, deal with them. And they were all freed from the tyrant indeed, and never again had to suffer beneath his yoke.

The smell and the sight of the filth dripping on the dais was making him feel nauseous. Really seriously worried he was about to be sick again in front of them all. Curse Alleen Durith and his choice of drinks.

Hang on, hang on, it suddenly occurred to him. I’d already drawn up my battle plan giving Osen command of the assault on

the Salen Gateway. There's no way I would have changed it if they'd asked me to. They tossed for it? What?

'Shall I kill him?' said Osen. Osen's hand was hovering on the hilt of his sword.

Marith nodded wearily. The prisoner's shoulders sagged. Osen drew the sword.

The prisoner raised his head, shouted out: 'You think yourself so powerful! But one of your own generals plots to betray you! Conspires against you! Thinks you nothing but filth and death! Think on that, King Ruin! Even those who serve you wish you dead! Betray you! I know!'

The prisoner's face leering at him.

The hate in those eyes. Why? Marith thought again. Why? I left your city untouched. I. Left. Your. City. Un. Touched.

'I won't tell,' the prisoner whispered. Smiled at Marith through bloody lips. 'I won't tell you. Even those closest to you loathe you. Plot to destroy you. See you for what you are. Encouraged me. Gave me money. Betrayed you. I know. But I won't tell. I won't tell you the name.'

'You're lying!' Hot desperate flush in Marith's face. 'I left Arunmen untouched!'

'Filth. Rot. Corruption. They all loathe you, King Ruin. Want to see you dead.'

'Marith—' Alleen Durith gestured to the guards. 'Take him away. Get him out of here. Now.'

'Betraying you!'

‘Get him out of here now!’

Osen ripped down with his sword. The Calien Mal. The Eagle Blade. Sword that had killed mages and lords and kings.

No sound. The prisoner dead on the floor.

Alleen rubbed his eyes. ‘Marith ...’

‘He was lying,’ said Marith.

Alleen said, ‘Gods, Osen, we needed to question him.’

‘He was lying. There was nothing to find out.’

Alis Nymen made a croaking sound. Dansa Arual was staring at Osen with her mouth open.

‘He was lying, he was a traitor,’ said Osen. ‘Who wanted to listen to any more of that poison?’ He shrugged at Marith. ‘Let’s go and get a drink.’

Four glorious years. Half the world broken at his feet. Broken towers, burned fields, silver crowns, gold crowns, thrones of gold, thrones of iron, thrones of wood, thrones of stone. We march on and on to the horizon, places I barely knew existed places that I cannot imagine. Impossible to think, really, that these places drawn in ink on a map are real places where real people live. Look to the far south, stare at the clouds where the land and the sky meet – there are people living there, houses, tilled fields, people dying and being born, people thinking feeling dreaming as I dream. Children, he thought, live there. And it is absurd that they are real and exist there. I cannot imagine these places these people. I march my army on. We kill them. All across Irlast my dead lie scattered, mounds of them, my soldiers, dead! Their

bones lie on the dark earth for the crows and the dogs, all out of love for me. They march beneath my banners to die for me in places they do not believe are real places, killed by men they cannot imagine are real and live. Ask them why and they will give a thousand excuses. And yet they are ordinary men.

'I need to earn coin, I need to feed my family, my children will starve unless I earn a wage somehow.'

'I've got responsibilities to the rest of them in the squad. We're a team. I can't let them down.'

'I swore an oath to fight for my king. I am a man of honour. I cannot break my oath.'

'I didn't want to do it. But I was ordered to. If we all stopped doing anything we didn't completely agree with ...'

None of us know, in our hearts, why we do these things. Because we can. Because we do. They really think I don't know they're all waiting to betray me?

Two more days of victory feasting. Outside in the city, the Army of Amrath swarmed over the ruins, killing everything they found. Marith took Osen and Alleen Durith with him to visit the temple of the god spirit of Arunmen. See the house of the enemy that had defied him. He had visited the temple after he had been crowned here, and the presence of the god spirit had been welcoming to him as a king and an equal. So now he must come again as victor and conqueror. Killer of the god. Have a smug but entirely justified gloat. Twice, you beat me off, but in the end I was the stronger. You promised to defend your city,

and you failed, like all the weak things of life. The black stone that was the god's physical form had shattered, they said, at the moment his blow had struck.

Also, the temple was the architectural highlight of the city, and thus of all Calchas. A very beautiful building. Huge and elegant. Loaded with beauty in gold and gemstones. Famed for its treasurers in jewels and silk. As one might expect. He was looking forward to seeing it again.

Soldiers were pouring over snow-covered rubble. Digging up lumps of melted smoke-blackened gold. A group of them were having a fight.

'What ... what happened?'

Alleen said, 'The dragons ...'

'... sat on it?'

'They took against it, certainly.'

Osen said, 'I think we might have managed to get some of the best things out of the remains. I can have the rest tracked down, if you like. The temple vessels and things.'

'No. It's fine. The soldiers can keep it. But the paintings on the walls ... it's a shame, I liked them.' There had been a picture of a woman done in jewels above the west window, her face was quite wrong but her golden hair, the way she held her arms – reminded him—

'The dragons destroyed it. Good.'

Osen scuffed at the snow. A lump of plaster. A suggestion of yellow paint. Not his mother. She hadn't been his mother.

The woman who killed his mother. She did. Remember. She did. Killed his mother and replaced his mother as queen and tried to put her own son in his place as king. And so he'd killed her and hung her body from the walls of Malth Elelane. Her and her son beside her.

'Please, Marith,' she'd begged him.

He went next to the place where they kept the wounded. Osen and Alleen did not come. A long walk. As was only correct and proper by every rule of warfare, the wounded were housed far off from anything, in tents far from the army's camp. A presence to it that Marith could feel pressing down on him. When he reached the place he was clammy with cold sweat.

Not so many wounded. Two days after the battle, most of them lay sleeping in the black earth with the dust between their teeth. They had marched through the Wastes and the Empty Peaks, crossed the Sea of Grief, tramped up and down Irlast from shore to shore. Desperate to share in his glory, reaching out for a tiny crust of what the *Ansikanderakesis Amrakane* had to offer. Four long years they had marched with him, they were the Army of Amrath and they would march and follow and pace out their lives following him. I don't even know where I'm going. I could close my eyes, stab my knife at random into the map. And they would follow. And they lie in the black earth dead and forgotten. And they lie here in the sickhouse, rotting.

Wounds like eyes. Wounds like open mouths. He could not look and he could not look.

The flesh grew over them, wounds healing puckered and distorted. Excrescences of blood and skin. Black traces embroidering their bodies. Arms and legs pus-swollen. Their mouths moved with scabs growing over them. Mould covering their faces, in their bones, their teeth, they spat and choked and swallowed it. Mould, eating them. Hard cold as marble. Soft and damp as leaves. Rippling dry as driftwood. He heard them breathing. Saw them breathing. No face, no hands, no eyes, no mouth, no ears. See hear feel taste touch red. Where they moved, they left black trails of their flesh behind them. Shapes and words. Their living bodies seeping away into liquid. They moved and jerked, some of them. Spoke. Knew. Wounds that had once been human faces turned groping towards him. Bodies swollen up vast with fluids, bodies shrivelled down, lumps of flesh men without arms or legs. Burned men. And at those he almost could not look. Yearning reaching towards him.

The worst, he thought afterwards, were those who did not seem so badly wounded. Like fruit rotted inside with maggots. They looked even strong, some of them.

‘The king, the king,’ the wounded whispered. Their voices thick and dry with pain. An old woman with no teeth in her mouth limped between them, giving them water, pressing a wet cloth to their cold, sweating faces, smoothing her fingers through their matted hair, running her hands over the pus of their wounds.

‘Hush now, deary, my boy, my boy, hush, hush, you sleep, you rest, you’ll be fine, you’ll be fine, deary, my boy.’

‘Water ... water ...’ A man clutched at Marith’s arm, not knowing him. ‘Water ...’ His stomach was a mass of bandages, fat with bandages, spreading blood like cracks on ice. A deep wound to the gut will kill you, sooner or later, no matter what you do. Every soldier knows that. Yes. ‘Water ... Mother! Mother!’ Verdigrised hand digging into him.

‘Hush, hush, deary, my boy.’ The nurse limped over wetted its black lips, pressed her wet cloth onto its white face. ‘Hush, deary, it’s well, you’ll soon be well.’

At the far end of the tent the dead were piled. They should be taken away for burial each day. They had not been taken away. Some of the bodies must have been there since the first day of the siege. Beetles had got in there, and flies. A seething column of ants ripped the dead wounds open. Mould grew over black meat.

‘Be well,’ Marith whispered to his men. ‘Be well. You who died for me.’ He should know their names. He used to know all his soldiers’ names. After his victory over King Selerie he had visited all the wounded, thanked each of them by name.

He thought: but I had a smaller army then. That’s unfair.

He thought: half of them died within hours. Whether I knew their names or not. I stopped bothering.

Thalia arrived the next evening. Sieges bored her now; she had decided to stay in Tereen in comfort until it was done. Her party swept into the palace courtyard, red banners crusted with snow. She rode a white horse, saddled and plumed in scarlet; she was wrapped in thick white furs showing only her eyes and her gloved

hands. She slid down from the saddle into Marith's arms.

'Thalia!'

There were snowflakes caught in her eyelashes. Marith kissed them away. Her eyes shone. The torchlight showed his reflection in her eyes smiling back at him. Dancing in the flickering light. She pushed back her hood, and the snow began to gather on her hair.

'Thalia! I didn't think you'd make it today, through the snow.' He frowned. 'It was foolish, to come in the snow.'

'I made them press on.' She took his hand. 'I was worried about you.'

'Worried? Why should you worry?'

Off behind her he noticed Osen and Alleen again exchanging glances. Well, yes, okay, so he'd only managed to get out of bed and stop throwing up about two hours ago, there'd been a nasty while when it looked like Osen might have to receive her in the king's place. But it had been a hard few days. Tiring. And it was Osen's fault, really, he'd chosen the drinks last night.

Thalia bent her head closer. 'And I ... I have news.'

'News?' Oh? Oh! A hope ran through him. And a shudder. Tried to brush it away. The things he had seen in her face, shining there, when he first saw her, and knew, and was so very afraid of her. *Why have you come to me?* But she had only smiled, and looked puzzled, and shaken her head. He took her hands protectively now. 'You shouldn't have risked it, in the snow. You're getting snow all over you. Let's get inside out of the

cold. I've had men out scouring all the jewellers' for you. Such beautiful things!

There was a stirring on the other side of courtyard, people moving forward around another horse, helping Kiana Sabryya down. The joy faded. Watched a servant thrust walking sticks into Kiana's hands, take her weight, help her steady herself on her feet. Kiana saw Marith watching and her eyes flashed in irritation. Osen hurried up to greet her. Marith heard her sigh.

'Marith ...' Thalia squeezed his hand. 'Leave her.'

Osen and Kiana seemed to be arguing about whether Kiana needed Osen's arm to lean on. Marith turned away.

'It wasn't your fault,' Thalia said gently.

War kills people. War hurts people. That's not exactly a big surprise, hey? She fought a demon, it injured her. What did she think it would do?

He shook himself. 'Obviously it wasn't my fault.'

They went slowly into the throne room. Servants, lords of empire, all falling to their knees as they passed. Thalia's wet furs were swept away: beneath, she wore a dress of pale grey velvet the colour of the winter sky, embroidered with a thousand tiny diamonds. She was blazing fire. Too brilliant to look at. Light rippled off her perfect face. Marith escorted her up the dais, seated her on the throne.

'The Queen of All Irlast!'

She laughed sadly. Bored laugh. I was already the Queen of All Irlast, Marith, her face said. 'The Queen of All Irlast.'

Everyone present prostrated themselves on the floor.

Marith gestured to Alleen. Servants hurried in carrying boxes. Poured out a river of gemstones at Thalia's feet. Her smile was sadder even than her laugh.

She is carrying my child. My child! It will all be better now, he thought. There was a memory, he was sure of it, his mother holding Ti in her arms, newborn, wrapped in white lace. 'Come here, Marith, look, you have a little brother, thank the gods, Marith, thank Amrath and Eltheia, you have a brother.' A tiny pink fist waved at him, and he had bent, kissed his brother's pink face. Such love . . . Such a precious little thing. They were so close in age, he was a baby himself when Ti was born, a false memory, his nurse had said, he was too young to remember, and besides an Altrersyr prince would have been wrapped in red silk, of course, not white lace. But he remembered it. A child! Oh, please. This time, please.

He reached down, picked up a necklace of rubies from the glittering pile at Thalia's feet. Held it up and placed it around her neck. His hands shook so badly he couldn't fasten it. It fell limply on the dais. In the light from her face the rubies winked up at him like scabs.

Chapter Five

The next morning they went out riding.

‘Are you sure it’s wise?’ Marith asked Thalia.

‘I rode here, didn’t I? I ...’ She frowned. ‘I don’t want – I mean – it seems better, this time – but it could still – like before – and I – I don’t want ...’

‘No. Yes. Of course.’ Had absolutely no idea what she was trying to say to him. Except that it hurt her. Saying it.

She had lost three pregnancies. Miscarried three times in the first few months. She was four months gone this time already, she said, you could see the swell of her belly through her dress if you knew to look. Waited to tell him, this time. Spare him false hope and grief. After three months, four months, the pregnancy becomes more certain, the wise women and the doctors all agreed on it.

‘The doctors say that I should keep myself strong.’ Her hand moving to her stomach, up to her throat, to the knife scars on her arm. ‘Last time, I ... I didn’t go out at all. Didn’t ride. Barely walked, even. Rested in bed. You know. And—’

He grasped her hands. Kissed them. Deep luminous bronze skin. His own skin white as moonlight. Our children must have your skin, he had told her once, and your eyes, and my hair. ‘I know you did,’ he said. Don’t say it. This time it will be good and well, it will, it will, it must be. I am a king. A god. A peasant in

a hovel can father a living child, if my father could father living children ... I raise my sword and a thousand men lie dying. I close my eyes and stab my knife into a map and an army marches and a city falls. I can father a living child, if I can do that.

Tiny pink flailing fists ... Such love.

He said, 'Well ... Come on, then. If you're sure.'

But the riding was good, for both of them. The snow cold washing them both clean. Forget. They avoided the city, skirting out to the east towards the Ane Headland. The wind was blowing against them. Blowing the smell of smoke away. The ground rose smooth and open; thick grassland, good horse country. Thalia spurred her horse to a gallop. The wind blew back her hood, her hair whipping up. Like black bare branches. Like birds' wings. The snow flew out from under the horse's hooves; the sunlight caught it, made it sparkle, it looked like the waves of a churning sunlit sea. Marith raced his horse to catch her, shouting 'Ha! Ha!' as he went. His breath puffed out like a dragon. 'Ha! Ha!'

Thalia pulled her horse to a standstill at the top of a high ridgeway. Marith stopped further down the slope, looking up at her outlined against the sky. The light was changing, clouds gathering, the light becoming flat and white and heavy, waiting for the snow. He trotted up to join her, looked down in delight at the plain spreading out before them like looking down into a pool. Thick with snow, untouched. And there, on the horizon, the dark line of the Sea of Tears, and what he could pretend in the blur of far distance were the fire mountains of Tarboran beyond.

A farmstead with a copse of firs behind it, hawthorn hedgerows flushed red. Tiny black shapes that must be cattle. A beech tree in brilliant copper leaves. Thalia pointed and he saw a hawk holding absolutely still in the white air. The hawk dived. Fast as thinking. A dog barked somewhere below them, loud, another barked in reply. The cattle moved in their field. He thought he could see the hawk flying up again. Perhaps it will all be well, he thought. Different, this time, or the next time. Look at it there! A beautiful world. Waiting for me.

Thalia slid down from her horse.

Threw a snowball at him.

Marith laughed, threw one back, missed. Thalia retrieved it, threw it, it smacked into his shoulder and the snow stuck to his cloak. He gathered a handful of snow, tossed it up into the sky, aiming over the edge of the ridge into the world spread beneath. Tossed another handful over Thalia, showering down around her as he had showered her with gems the previous night. Snow on her face. She wrinkled her snow-covered nose. Pushed him over in the snow. Dropped snow right on his head.

‘Stop! Argh!’

‘Stop?’

‘Stop, oh my queen!’

She pulled him to his feet again. Furry with snow: he felt like a furry white bear.

‘I am absolutely bloody freezing now.’ So Thalia wrapped her arms around him. Her skin was warm as the summer sun. They

looked together at the view before them, the white frozen world waiting. Our world, he thought. Beautiful for us together. And there is hope, still.

Marith said, 'Don't for gods' sake tell anyone, but I much prefer it out here to Illyr. You can see why Amrath started out to conquer the world, when you look at Illyr.'

'Oh, but Illyr's beautiful. Everywhere in the world is beautiful.' Strained voice. Joyful voice. Her nose wrinkled: 'Apart from the Wastes.'

The sun broke through a gap in the clouds, a crack of light in the sky too bright to look at, so bright it was almost black. Like the cloud was the edge of the world, the light beyond a void pouring some other life in. She pointed. 'Look! There's the hawk again.'

Black against the white. Closer, now: they could see the frantic beating of its wings. On the top of the ridgeway they were almost at its eye level. Marith thought: I wonder if it can see us watching it? Could I call it to me, like I can call a dragon?

The hawk dived. He couldn't see it land.

Thalia said, 'Do you remember the hawk in the desert? I'd never seen a hawk before. And the eagles, dancing around the peak of Calen Mon. I'd never seen an eagle before, either. Or a mountain. Or the snow.' She smiled. Kissed him. Wrapped herself around him. Warm as the summer sun. 'All those things, we have.'

'All the world,' Marith said. 'All the world, I promised I'd show

you. All the wonders. And our children. The world will be for them. Heaped up for them.'

On and on. Over and over. Pressing forwards to the end.

'We will announce soon that you are pregnant.' He was King of All Irlast. Of course he could father a child that would live.

Thalia laughed. 'I should think everyone in our army knows already. I see the faces of my servant women every time they come to change my sheets. The way they stare at my stomach when I dress. It's the only thing that seems to interest them.'

Had to think about this. 'Yes ... Well ... Anyway ... But ... Yes. Yes. We'll announce it soon. The army: gods, they'll rejoice! And when it's born! It's lucky for a baby to be born at Sunreturn. Well-omened.'

'Is it?' She said, 'The doctors said after Sunreturn, Marith.'

'Oh. Yes. Well ... Yanis Stansel's youngest son was born at Sunreturn, always complained everyone forgot his birthday. I'm sure it's just as lucky for a baby to be born in the spring.'

She said, 'We're marching south, Marith. By the time the baby is born we'll be in the south. Where there won't be a winter or a spring.'

'So ... maybe we'll march north again.' It should be born in Ethalden, perhaps, he thought. Or Malth Elelane. A king's palace for a king's heir. It would be nice, he thought, to go home for a while. Show his child the places of his own childhood. Sit in the hall of his ancestors, watching his children play on the floor with the dogs in the warmth of the hearthfire.

I will take her back to Malth Elelane, he thought. Go home. One day. I didn't want to go back home at all once and now here I am, king. It cannot be so very hard to go back there now. All I need to do is give an order to march north. All I need to do, he thought, is turn my horse now to ride north. Come with me now, Thalia. We'll ride away home to live in peace. You want that, too, I think. Do you? Raise our child in peace.

It was beginning to snow again. He began to worry suddenly that the cold ... She has lost three pregnancies already. His mother had died in childbed. Take care of her and the child.

'She must not die!' he had screamed to the doctors, the first time she miscarried. 'If she dies, I will kill you.'

'It is not uncommon, My Lord King, for a woman to miscarry in the first few months. There is little danger to the mother, this early. A tragedy, but not a dangerous thing, in these early months.' Just a lump of blood. Like a woman stabbed with a sword thrust. So three times now he had wept tears of relief. But it was snowing, and she must be looked after, though she was smiling with pleasure at the snow. Put her head back, stuck out her tongue to catch the snowflakes.

'We should go back, Thalia.'

She looked out over the frozen landscape. 'I suppose we should. I could stand here forever.' She sighed, laughed, put her hands on his wet snow-crusting cloak. 'You're getting cold?'

'The horses,' he said with dignity, 'are getting cold.'

They rode back through the ruins of Arunmen. Thalia wanted

to see. Always, she wanted to see.

‘I need to remember,’ she said. ‘I am not ashamed of it: they fought us, they lost. Such is the way of things. Some draw the red lot, some draw the black or the white. But . . . I should remember. See it for myself.’

The city was a desolation, black rubble, the great obsidian walls tumbled down. Pools of blood, frozen, black and hard like the stone, the whole city glazed in blood. Fires still burning, dragon fire so hot the very stones were cracked open, holes in the earth where the fury of the fighting had devoured itself. Bodies in the rubble, under ice and ash and snowfall, dead faces masked in snow, rimed in blood. Burned. Dismembered. Hacked up and swallowed and spat out. Marith steered the horses carefully away from the ruined temple. Fragments of yellow paint. Around the palace, a new city of the Army of Amrath was forming: soldiers’ tents, cookfires, canteens, workshops. A smithy was working: Marith heard again the ring of the hammer, breathed in the hot metal scent. A hiss that was molten bronze being poured. A boy in a scarlet jacket embroidered with seed pearls, gold at his neck and waist and ankles, his face running with hatha sores, touting offering himself for one iron piece. A pedlar shouting his wares: ‘Tea and soap! Salt and honey! Spices! Herbs! Lucky charms!’ Two women washing clothes in a silver bowl that must once have graced a lord’s table. Plump glossy children in fur and satin, playing snowballs in the ruins of a nobleman’s great house. One of them hit another straight on, got snow all over her coat, and

Marith laughed.

Some enterprising person had got a tavern back open. The front wall and the roof had been completely demolished; they'd made the best of it by setting up a fire for mulled wine and laying out some brightly coloured rugs; rigged up the remains of a soldier's campaign tent to keep off the snow. It all looked very charming. Marith nodded at Thalia, they dismounted and tethered the horses, wandered up.

Everyone recognized them, of course, so they walked through a sea of prostrate bodies, more and more people running to kneel, to be in his presence, to see him through half-closed eyes. Voices ran like seawater: 'The king! The king! Amrath Reborn! *Ansikanderakesis Amrakane!* The king! The king!' Someone starting a song of praise for him.

Bliss.

Blush rising in his face from sheer delight at it. He laughed with joy.

They sat down on the bright pretty rugs, the woman running the place rushed over with cups of hot spiced wine, a dish of keleth seeds, a dish of cakes. The cups were enamelled silver, yellow garlands around a scene of fighting birds. Very finely done, actually: he'd guess not from the tavern but looted from somewhere in the east and lugged halfway across Irlast. The wine was delicious, thick and golden. Also looted. The cakes were stale and dry as sand.

The tavern woman prostrated herself flat on her face in the

snow. ‘I am honoured beyond all honour. My Lord King, My Lady Queen, I kneel at your feet, I am your slave. Take the cups, the plates, everything here in this tavern, our gifts, our token of our love for you.’

Beyond bliss. Ah, such a good thing, to be loved like this. He smiled down at the tavern woman, told her to get up, kissed her hand. Drained his cup, waved over a passing soldier: ‘Take this cup back to the palace. Have Lord Durith summoned, tell him to send a dozen gold cups to this woman in place of this one she has kindly given me.’ The woman went pink with astonishment. Tears in her eyes. Thalia laughed with delight.

‘My Lord King. My Lord King. Thank you. Thank you.’

‘I’ll take a bottle of this wine, too, then, if I may?’ Marith said, smiling at the tavern woman. ‘It’s better than the wine they served my court last night.’

More laughter. The woman said, a look of great daring in her face, ‘I need the wine, My Lord King, for my customers, who must have higher standards in drink than your court.’

Ha! ‘They do. They do. Anyone in Irlast has higher standards than my court.’

He settled himself further back on the rugs, stretching himself leaning against Thalia. Ate another stale cake. The tavern woman poured him another drink in a new cup. She was wearing a ring on every finger; they clinked musically against the glass of the bottle. She had silver earrings that jingled, her dress was green velvet. She was positively fat.

Raised a toast to her. 'I'll buy a bottle for a hundred thalers. Make you a lady of my court.'

'But I'll make far more than a hundred thalers, My Lord King, telling my customers they're drinking wine I refused to sell to the *Ansikanderakesis Amrakane* the joy of the world the King of All Irlast.'

Gods, she was good. He got up and bowed to her. 'Like the wine, you're too fine for my court. I'll give you a hundred thalers anyway.'

'And I'll give you another bottle of this wine for free, My Lord King.' Her earrings rattled, she looked at Thalia sitting in her thick fur cloak. 'And, if I may, if I may be so bold, My Lady Queen ...'

Oh ho. Marith tensed, Thalia tensed, relaxed both together, smiling at each other, squeezed hands. The whole army knows. The tavern woman went into the back of her shop, Marith ate a third stale cake in the time she was gone.

Thalia whispered, 'A horrible itchy baby's dress? A blanket? A pair of absurdly tiny booties?'

'A blanket. Hand-knitted. Shush. You're being cruel.'

'And you're getting cake crumbs on my cloak. How can you eat them, anyway? They must have been baked last week.'

'Amrath lived rough with his army ...' Wiped crumbs from the white fur, leaving a yellowy smudge. Whoops. Maybe she wouldn't notice. He tried surreptitiously to pick at the mess. 'Anyway, shush, she's coming back.'

‘A blanket,’ Thalia whispered. ‘Dark red. With a sword pattern on it.’

He almost choked crumbs over her. ‘Shush!’

The woman returned smiling. Didn’t look like she was carrying a blanket ... She held out a branch of white flowers to Thalia. ‘The tree behind the tavern here flowered this morning, My Lady Queen. All out of season – the dragon fire, we thought maybe, My Lady Queen, the heat. But here. Perhaps it flowered for you.’

‘Thank you.’ Thalia bent to sniff the flowers’ sweet perfume. ‘Thank you very much.’ They finished the wine, Thalia made a face of mock terror at Marith that they’d be offered another plate of cakes. When they had ridden away out of earshot they both burst out laughing. The sun rises, the sun sets, and not everyone in the world thinks only of tiny booties and baby blankets.

‘But the flowers are very beautiful,’ said Thalia. ‘How strange, that the tree flowered in the snow. Do you think it was really the dragon fire?’

‘It’s wintersweet blossom. It’s meant to be in flower now.’ He was beginning to feel rather sleepy after all the wine and cakes. ‘That’s what it does. Hence the name.’

Thalia looked down at the branch, which she had woven into her horse’s reins. ‘It’s still beautiful. We should plant it in the gardens at Ethalden.’ Looking down at the flowers, she noticed where he’d got crumbs rubbed into her cloak. ‘What’s this? My new cloak ... Oh, Marith. Cake crumbs.’

He looked at her belly. ‘Get used to it. I had to have cake crumbs cut out of my hair once.’

Chapter Six

‘I had to have cake crumbs cut out of my hair, once.’

Ti’s hair. His mother – his stepmother, the bitch who killed his mother, remember, remember that – his stepmother had had to cut cake crumbs out of Ti’s hair, once. He had killed Ti and he had killed his mother. Hung their bodies from the walls of Malth Elelane. He remembered the way his mother’s hair had blown in the wind.

Three miscarriages. But after three months, four months, the pregnancy is more established, the baby is more likely to be born and live.

He felt sick. The stupid stale cakes.

The next day Marith rode out alone. The land was very empty, the burned fields blanketed in snow. A few surviving villages clinging on in the ruins, ragged-faced farmers tending their cattle. His soldiers were out, rounding up the cattle, pillaging the villages for food and men for the army to consume. A ravaging beast, an army. Never ceased its hunger. Indeed, its hunger grew and grew.

Rode past a line of men and women in tattered clothing too thin for the weather, sick faces staring. Rounded up to march in his army. Men and women and children and old men and cripples and the maimed and the half-dead. It didn’t matter who they were. Whether they were strong or weak. If they had no

other use, they would deflect an arrow or a sword. If they had no other use, they would die. The soldiers with them prostrated themselves in the snow when they saw him. The new conscripts stared, then did the same. Whispers. His name cried in blessing. The joy in their eyes, radiating off them, the fulfilment of their lives, to see him.

King Marith! King Marith! *Ansikanderakesis Amrakane!* I can die now, for my heart and my eyes have beheld him.

Marith pulled up his horse before them. ‘We will fight,’ he called to them. ‘You will march in my army, and you will fight, and you will be victorious, and you will conquer the world! This gift, I give you. All of you, you will do this. Conquer the world!’

‘Death!’ the soldiers cried back to him. Shining in ecstasy. ‘Death! Death! Death!’

He stopped around midday in a bare high place without any signs of human life. No – there, to the west where the land dropped down into a valley, a single plume of hearth smoke rose. A little village sheltering there, perhaps.

No matter. He dismounted, stood against the white sky. Raised his arms. Called out.

‘Athelamyn Tiamenekyr. Ansikanderakesis teimre temeset kekilienet.’

Come, dragons. Your king summons you.

A long silence. And then the slow beating of vast wings.

Weak things, dragons. Far weaker than he had first thought. Ynthe the magelord saw them as gods and wonders. Osen and

Alleen thought of them as toys: 'Ride it, Marith', 'Just use it to kill them all, Marith', 'Make it sit up and beg and roll over at your feet'. He himself had thought that the dragons were like him, once. The only things in all the world that might understand him. Things of love and desire and hunger and grief and need. He had been a fool, to think that.

He thought: do dragons rear their children? Care for them? Feel love?

He thought: no.

The dragons came down in the snow before him. One black and red. One green and silver. Huge as dreams. He had summoned them out of the desert along the coast of the Sea of Grief, called into the dark and they had come together side by side, their wings almost touching. They could be mother and child, lovers, siblings; what they thought towards each other he did not know and could not know. What they did, when he did not need them, he did not know. Dark eyes looked at him. Like looking down into the depths of the sea. Never look into a dragon's eyes. Look into a dragon's eyes and you are lost. Eyes black with sorrow. Such hatred there, staring vast ancient unblinking down at him.

He thought: I call them and they come to me.

The dragons turned their heads away from him. Lowered their eyes. The red dragon spoke in a hiss of fire. Dry rasp of pain. Its breath stank of hot metal. Dead flesh rotting in its yellowed teeth.

'Kel temen ysare genherhr kel Ansikanderakil?'

What is it that you want, my king?

I don't know, he thought. What is it that I want? I want to die, he almost said. The red dragon almost spoke it. The words there in the stink of its breath. I want to die: kill me, he almost said.

Or kill the soldiers. My soldiers. Come down in fire, burn my army to dust. We spread out across the world in blood and fire, we have destroyed half the world but the world is endless, the road goes on and always there is another conquest waiting on the horizon. All I need to do now is speak one word to make it stop.

Dragons are not gods, he thought then. Not wonders. There was nothing in the world that they could give him. Huge things, huge as dreams; he stood between them tiny and vulnerable. He could crush them.

'Kel temen ysare genherhr kel Ansikanderakil?' the red dragon asked again.

'Ekliket ysarken temeset emnek tythet. Ekliket ysarken temeset amrakyr tythet. Ekliket ysarken temeset kykgethet,' Marith said in reply.

What is it that you want, my king?

I want you to bring death. I want you to bring fire. I want you to kill.

Always the same words. The same commands given. Kill! Kill! Kill! On and on forever. On and on until the world ends. So close to asking. But I don't ask. Why do we waste our breath saying it?

If my army was destroyed, he thought, I would cease to be

king. What would I be, if I were not a king?

‘You are tools,’ Marith shouted at the dragons. ‘Nothing more. Things I send out to kill.’

The dragons nodded their heads in obedience. The green dragon might smile, even. Scars on it deep in its body, wounded, its body moved with the awkwardness of something in pain. The red dragon thrashed its tail. Hating him. Tired. Old. Just wanting to sleep.

The green dragon said, as it always did, ‘*Amrakane neke yenkanen ka sekeken.*’ Amrath also did not know why. ‘*Serelamyrlen teime immikyr. Ayn kel genher kel serelanei temen?*’ We are your tools. And what are you?

They leapt into the air together. Red and black, green and silver, so huge he was left blinded. The snow where they had crouched was melted. He watched them spiralling up and outwards. Off to the south, towards the Forest of Calchas, the Sea of Tears, the Forest of Khotan. Tiny jets of flame on the horizon. Or perhaps he was imagining them. But when he closed his eyes he saw it burning. The trees burning. The sea rising up in steam.

Go back four years. Marith sits in his new-built fortress of Ethalden, new-crowned King of the White Isles and Ith and the Wastes and Illyr. He has taken his father’s kingdom. Yes, well, any number of sons have done that. He has taken the neighbouring kingdom. That’s not exactly novel behaviour from a new ambitious young king with his people to impress. He has

taken the kingdom of his holy ancestors, he is a king returned in glory, he has restored a blighted land to greatness, he has been revenged on the evil-doers who ill-treated him. That's absolutely right and proper. Expected by everyone. And then ...

'Gods, this is glorious,' Osen Fiolt says one night in the new-built fortress of Ethalden, as they sit together in a feasting hall with walls and floor and ceiling of solid gold. 'Goodbye sleeping in a stinking tent in the pissing rain. Hello sitting by the fire with our feet up. We're richer than gods and worshipped like gods and we've still got our whole lives ahead of us to do absolutely nothing but enjoy ourselves in.

'Look at my hands,' Osen says, stretching out his right hand. 'Look, the calluses are finally going down. I might grow a beard, you know? Befitting my noble status as First Lord of Illyr. Or get my wife pregnant. You're going to have a child, Marith, you should maybe grow a beard as well. Dress like a respectable family man, stop wearing all black. Kings wear long robes, have well-combed beards, feast and wench rather than drink and mope. Those pretentious boys quoting godsawful poetry and weeping over life's burden ... and now we've got wives and children and kingdoms to rule. Gods, who'd have thought?

'I will do nothing,' Osen says, 'but sit by the fire and drink the finest wines and eat the choicest meats and fuck my wife and my servants. Raise a horde of spoilt brat children. Never pick up a sword again.'

'It feels strange walking,' Marith says, 'without a sword at my

hip. Unbalanced.’

‘Lighter,’ Osen says. ‘Much lighter. The joys of not wearing armour! A real spring in my step.’

‘That too.’

They both go to bed early, dozy with warmth. It’s very restful, doing nothing. It’s amazing how tiring paperwork and bureaucracy and helping your wife choose baby things can be. He goes to bed early, wakes late in a warm room in a bed of gold and ivory and red velvet, soft as thistledown after campaign beds. His bedchamber looks very much like the one he slept in at Malth Salene. He is not sure whether Thalia realizes this. Unlike at Malth Salene, the morning sun shines in on his face. He tries to put this thing he feels into words; even to himself he cannot say what it is.

Two days later he is reviewing the Army of Amrath. Dismissing most of it. Illyr is taken. The Wastes are taken. Ith is taken. The White Isles were and are his own. He is king. War is done. All is at peace.

‘You have to disband some of them,’ Lord Nymen the Fishmonger says to him. ‘They are driving the people of Ethalden mad with their brawling, the women fear to walk the streets after dark because of them, innkeepers and merchants shut up shop at a soldier’s approach. As they say: a friendly army without a purpose is more dangerous than an enemy army at the gates. Also, more seriously, My Lord King – do you know how much this army costs?’

‘I have the wealth of three kingdoms at my feet.’

There is a short pause. ‘You had the wealth of three kingdoms at your feet, My Lord King,’ Aris Nymen says.

A thousand times a thousand soldiers. And horses. And armour. And equipment. And engineers and doctors and weaponsmiths and farriers and grooms and camp servants and carters and ...

‘Yes, yes, I suppose. I see. Yes.’

‘The cost of Queen Thalia’s temple, My Lord King ... It being made of solid gold ... Amrath’s tomb ... The work on the harbour is proving more expensive than we thought ...’

‘Hang the man who thought up the original cost then. No. No. I’m joking. You’re right.’ I am King of Illyr and Ith and the Wastes and the White Isles. I am invincible, invulnerable, soon I will have a strong son to follow me. What am I afraid of, that I need an army of a thousand times a thousand men? He rubs his eyes. For the first time since he took Illyr, he does not sleep well. He stands in the great courtyard in Ethalden, raised up before his army on a dais of sweetwood hung with silver cloth. They cheer him. They hold out their hands to him. Their faces shine with love.

‘Amrath! Amrath! Amrath! King Marith!’

He smiles, basking in it. They shine so brightly, his soldiers, so strong, so proud. He begins to speak.

Stirring. Faces grow pale. Eyes stare up at him in astonishment.

The war is over. They have won eternal glory, until the drowning of the world the poets will sing of them. They can go home now in triumph to their friends and families, tell them of their prowess, show them the riches they have won. If they do not want to go home they can have land in Illyr, slaves to work it, a life of leisure, farming: the soil in Illyr now is rich and good. That is what all men want, isn't it? A house, a garden in which children are playing, fruit trees, clear sweet water, fresh meat, fresh bread. Long days of peace stretch before them. They are heroes from the poems, every one of them. They will look back on what they have done with pride all their lives.

Muttering. Whispering. He can see tears on some of their faces, at the thought of this time ending. Feels tears himself, to dismiss them. They who have made him all he is. He hears his voice unwinding out of his mouth.

Their voices come back mournful as seabirds: 'But ... But ... My Lord King ...' 'You can't ... you cannot abandon us, Lord King ...' 'We fought for you. We shed our own blood for you. You can't abandon us. Please, Lord King, do not abandon us to live away from you.' 'We are the Army of Amrath! You are our king! Without this, we are ... we are nothing.' 'Please! Please, Lord King!'

It feels ... shameful, and sad, and delicious.

'A farm?' a voice shouts, bitter, croaking, it sounds like a raven cawing, like one of the old women who sell meat in the army's camp. 'A farm? What do we want with farming?'

‘What about our pay?’ a voice shouts. ‘Never mind bloody poetry. We’re two months’ pay in arrears, Lord King!’

There is something in that voice he has not heard for a long time. *‘Prince Ruin. Gods, you stink.’ ‘You’re disgusting, Marith, look at the state of you, how can you do this to me? To your father? Look what you’re doing to him.’*

‘What about our pay? Yes!’

A great roar, like the waves when the tide is high and the storm wind is blowing, wave crashing against wave: ‘What about our pay, you cheap bastard? Pay us!’ ‘You can’t abandon us! You are our king! Don’t abandon us!’ ‘Pay us, you cheap bastard shit!’ A voice shouts, ‘Pension us off, will you? Who made you all this, eh? Who made you king?’ ‘You’ve got a fucking palace!’ a voice shouts. ‘What have we got?’ ‘You can’t abandon us,’ a voice shouts. ‘You owe us. We made you king.’

He looks down on his army who have conquered three kingdoms for him, and a great fear takes him.

‘You will have all that you are owed. Those who wish to remain here in Illyr will have land to farm. Those who wish to go home to their families I will provide with passage.’ His voice is shaking. His hand goes to the hilt of his sword. ‘You are dismissed.’ A few of them still jeer. Dogs’ faces, snarling at him. Many of them stand openly weeping. Frozen. The tears on their faces look like snowflakes. ‘You are dismissed,’ he shouts at them. He walks down from the dais away from them into his palace. His back is turned to them inviting a sword blade between his shoulders. He

can almost, almost feel one of them stabbing a sword blade into him. No one dares to go near him: they see his eyes, they see the shadows around him, they hear the shadows scream in triumph. If he had dismissed them after he took Malth Tyrenae. After he took Malth Elelane. If they had never crowned him king ... They howl and moan behind him, prayers, entreaties, curses, ‘Amrath,’ they beg him, ‘Amrath. You cannot do this to us.’ ‘They are dismissed,’ he shouts to Osen Fiolt and Alis Nymen. ‘Dismissed.’

Thalia looks at him with sorrow. ‘They don’t mean it, Marith. They have shed their blood for you. Of course they are upset.’ She says, ‘They will be glad enough soon, when they have got back home safe to their families.’ She is pregnant, soon he will have a family. ‘We marched all across the Wastes with them,’ she says, putting her arms around him as she will soon put her arms around their son. ‘They suffered for us. They shared in our glory, crowned us, celebrated victory with us. I feel sad myself,’ she says, ‘to see this ending, to be dismissing them after everything they have done for us. But we will be glad of it,’ she says, ‘and they will be. When we have our son and they have their homes and their families around them.’

Yes: he thinks of his own father King Illyn, running with him in the gardens of Malth Elelane, his father’s stern face creased up with laughing. ‘*Catch me, Daddy!*’ ‘*Caught you, Marith! Caught you!*’ He walks up and down in his chambers, trying to block out the sound of their voices, cursing them.

‘Leave them,’ Thalia says, ‘Marith. Look,’ her face changes,

'look, Marith,' she says suddenly, 'they are beginning to disperse.'

'They are?' He comes to the window to join her. It is coming on to evening, growing colder, the smell of their evening meal cooking hangs warm in the air. It is true, they are beginning to drift away, more and more of them. Their shouts are fading. The courtyard cannot be more than half full.

'I told you they would,' Thalia says. Her voice too is almost regretful. 'They suffered so much for us,' she says. 'Pay them double, Marith, when you send them off.'

'I can't afford to pay them double. I can't afford to pay them anything. You wouldn't happen to have two months' pay arrears in your jewellery box?' Already, he thinks. Already. I thought they might stay there calling on me a little longer. As Thalia says, they suffered for me, they were victorious with me, they shed their blood for me. And yet this is so very easy. I have my kingdom, my palace, my queen, soon I will have a son. Sweet golden dreams of peace. In the courtyard only a very few of the soldiers are left now. Outraged shouts turn to muttered grumbles. Grumbles to knowing complaints. 'Oh well,' they say to one another, 'oh well, we knew it would be coming. If he packs us off soon at least we'll be home for the spring.' 'Got my wife a diamond necklace when we sacked Tyrenae. Was looking forward to giving it to her. Lost it to a whore one night when I was hammered. If the bastard pays us off, maybe I'll buy her another one.' 'A farm, yeah? Never been outside Morr Town's walls before we started marching. A farm might be nice.'

‘Bastard. Throwing us over. But that’s kings, yeah? What else did we expect?’

That night the city of Ethalden is filled with whispers. Some of the soldiers drink to celebrate their return to homes and families. Some sit in lonely silence, weeping. Some shout their anger to the night sky and the sea. Marith walks the walls of his fortress, paces the corridors and halls. Seabirds scream in the darkness. Something that might be a hawk screams. It cannot be this easy. In the grey light of dawn he comes back into his chambers. In the bedchamber Thalia lies asleep, her face crumpled and strained.

‘The day when we were crowned King and Queen of Illyr, Thalia. Do you remember that?’ Little more than a month ago. He cannot remember it properly now. Too bright. Too unreal. Too wonderful. They stood in the great golden feasting hall, silver trumpets rang out like birdsong, every living soul in Illyr acclaimed them, the air itself seemed to blaze with gold. ‘The most perfect moment in any human lifetime.’ Grief overwhelms him. Self-pity and shame.

There are reports the next morning that there has been fighting in the city, groups of soldiers fighting each other, a mob of soldiers has been looting houses and shops. A small group of soldiers returns to the great courtyard to entreat him. Alis Nyman and Yanis Stansel go out to them, pay them off with silver pennies. They are grateful. Cheer their king. File away. Marith and Thalia, Osen and his wife Matrina, Kiana Sabryya and Alleen Durith go out for a day’s hunting. Blackthorn is budding in all

the hedgerows. There are snowdrops in bloom by the roadside and faint tracteries of frost on the north slopes. In the distance the great central spire of his fortress flashes out silver and pearl, hung with red banners that dance in the morning wind.

‘Are you growing a beard, Osen?’ Thalia asks.

Osen strokes the stubble on his chin, grins at Marith. ‘Possibly.’ He seems to be wearing a very ugly new brown coat as well, loose and badly fitting.

Thalia looks very hard at Marith’s chin.

They ride past a stream where the willow trees are furzed yellow with catkins. In the fields, they are ploughing the soil for the summer wheat. Thalia says, ‘I might well have two months’ pay arrears in my jewel box.’ The air smells so nearly of spring. When they get back to Ethalden there are petitioners waiting to ask the king’s judgement. A dispute needs to be settled concerning an Ithish lord’s inheritance rights. A messenger has come from Malth Tyrenae to report on the work rebuilding the city. The tax official on Third Isle has been dismissed for embezzlement, the king must approve his replacement. There is a letter from Malth Elelane reporting the financial situation on the White Isles, so that the king can be advised and take action. There is a letter from Malth Elelane reporting that a lord’s son on Seneth Isle has run off with another lord’s wife, the lord’s son’s mother is asking the king to do something.

That evening a group of soldiers gathers before the closed gates of the fortress, shout demands to see the king. But in many

taverns the soldiers are drinking happily, raising a cup to their king who will soon send them home.

He goes to bed early. Thalia is tired out after hunting. He lies in bed listening to her breathing, and he cannot sleep. He goes up to the window, throws open the shutters, Thalia makes a moaning sound in her sleep. The night is clear and cold. He thinks of riding down to the sea, standing in the dark to listen to the waves beating on the shoreline. Tastes the salt damp on his skin. A gull screams high in the rooftops of his fortress. He thinks of dead bodies cast up on a beach.

At noon the next day he again summons the Army of Amrath before him. Stands again to address them on a dais hung with silver silk. The men stare up at him. They are wary. Frightened of themselves. Frightened of him They move and murmur like waves. A voice shouts, 'Pay us!' and is hushed. A voice shouts, 'Don't abandon us! Lord King! Please!'

How could he have thought it could simply end?

He cannot speak, at first. His mouth feels dry as desert sand. He stares down at them. They stare back at him.

His hand rests on the hilt of his sword. I don't have to do this, he thinks. All I have to do is walk away.

He rubs hard at his eyes. His voice and his hands tremble as he speaks. 'The army will not be disbanded. Not a single man of you. My companions, my most loyal ones, my friends. The Army of Amrath will be doubled in number! Every one of you shall be re-equipped in new armour with a new sword sharp enough

to draw blood from the wind. There will be places in my army for your children, your lovers, your friends. All your arrears of pay will be compensated twice over. And in three weeks' time the Army of Amrath will march out! You will be glutted with gold and with killing! My companions! My friends!' He draws the sword Joy, holds it shining aloft, white light dancing along its blade. 'We will see victory and triumph!' His soldiers cheer with tears of happiness running down their faces. Alis Nymen cheers. Osen Fiolt cheers louder than any of them.

He thinks of Thalia cupping her hands over her belly. She just about shows now, when she wears a tight dress. The women of the court croon over her, fussing, 'Oh, My Lady, how wonderful, how wonderful, oh, the greatest blessing a woman can have, My Lady, oh, joy to you, joy to you, My Lady Queen, My Lord King.' Many of them had mothers or sisters or friends who died in childbirth. His own mother died in childbirth, a dead child rotting in her womb, it had to be cut up inside her, they say, extracted piece by rotting piece. The sounds a woman makes, in childbirth ... 'The greatest joy of your life,' the women say to Thalia, fussing. He knows it is.

He has some claim to the throne of Immier. His great-great-great-great-grandfather's second wife was a princess of Immier; her father died without a male heir and the crown passed to someone else. Disgraceful. The throne should have gone to ... whatever the girl's name was. And the first Amrath conquered Immier a thousand years ago. Well, then. Immier is not a rich

land. But there are many people there for his army to kill.

‘Death!’ the men chant, loud as trumpets. How much they love him! ‘Glory! Glory! King Marith!’

His uncle’s voice, mocking him: *‘You were such a happy child, Marith. But one might have guessed, even then, that this would be where you’d come to in the end.’* Where any man would come to, once they started on this.

He thinks: Immier, Cen Andae, Cen Elora, the Forest of Maun in the furthest south of Irlast ... it doesn’t matter where we go. We will march, we will fight, we will kill, we will march on. We dream of glory, and we must have more glory, and more, and more. Men grow restless, look wistfully on swords growing blunted, dream of times past when they were as gods. Looted coin is soon spent.

Thalia miscarries that same evening. The first of them: she has lost two more children since, on the march; they are marching still and now she is pregnant again. He still owes his men two months’ arrears of pay. But, now, behold, half the world is conquered.

The dragons were black dots in the white snow sky. Marith rode back to Arunmen through the snow falling heavier. Thick soft white flakes like feathers. Falling until he could barely see his hand in front of his face. He rode along unconcerned. A king in his kingdom. Silent in the snow. A wolf slunk past almost in front of his horse’s hooves. Looked at him. Sadder eyes than the dragons. What might have been a scrap of human flesh in its

mouth. The horse snorted, rolled its eyes. The wolf was injured, like the green and silver dragon, a long wound running down its flank. Maggots crawled there, even in the winter snowfall. It was heavy and fat from glutting itself on his dead.

'Denakt,' he shouted at it, as though it was another dragon. *Go. Leave.* It stared at him. Padded off, disappeared into the snow. He rode on, in a while came across the body it had been feeding on, a man, torn apart lying there. Someone who didn't want to be a soldier, he'd guess. Tried to escape his men. The face was untouched. Mouth open. Eyes open. The snow slowly covering it.

Chapter Seven

Envoys came to Arunmen from Chathe and Immish and every city of his empire, brought him gifts from every corner of the world. Treasures and jewels, objects of great beauty and wealth. White horses. Silver cloth as light as sea foam. A thousand ingots each of iron and copper and lead and tin. The emissaries from Chathe came to kneel before him, swear their loyalty. He smiled at them, raised them up, promised them his faith back in return as long as they remained loyal to him. Ryn Mathen nodded, eyes bright with happiness. On a whim, Marith ordered the emissaries to be given a hundred chests of gold and silver, to bring back to King Heldan as an honour gift. The lords of Marith's empire knelt and crowned him with wreaths of flowers. He held races and dances and feasts. The soldiers paraded for him, dressed in their finery, polished bronze, red plumes nodding on their helmets, red cloaks, gleaming, marching and wheeling in the snow. The music of the bronze: they danced the sword dance, clashed their spears, shouted for joy. So many of them, uncountable, like the trees in a forest. They roared out his name with triumph, he who had given them mastery of the world, made them lords of life and death. Their love burned off them, warm and joyous; Marith gasped as he watched them, his face radiant, breathless, still, after everything, half unbelieving, all this, all this, for him. The emissaries departed, leaving more allied troops

in his army's ranks. The Army of Amrath prepared to march out. The forges rang with the clash of hammers, the glowing fire of liquid metal, burning day and night. More swords! More spears! More helms! More armour! Grain carts rumbled in beneath the ruins of the gateways. Provisions for a long hard march. A new levy of troops marched in from Illyr, young men who had not yet seen the glory of his conquests, staring wide-eyed and hungry at the ruins of the city, the tents piled with plunder, the campfires of his army numberless as the stars. They marched in between towers of white newly slain bones, white skulls grinning, the shriek of carrion birds. He saw in their eyes the wonder, the longing to be part of this. They saw him, and he felt their love rise like mountains. A marvel, a gift unparalleled, that they could look upon him, fight for him, swear to him their swords and their spears and the strength in their body and all the length of their lives, to kill and to die at his will.

Onwards. Ever onwards. New lands to conquer. The road goes on and on. Issykol. Khotan, with its sunless forests. The lawless peoples of the Mountains of Pain. Turain, with its wheat fields and its silver river. Mar. Maun. Allene.

The Sekemleth Empire of the Golden City of Sorlost.

Gods, he sees it, so clear in his mind. Yellow dust, yellow sand, yellow light. Magnolia trees and lilac trees and jasmine, all in flower; women in silk dresses, bells tinkling at their wrists and ankles; in the warm dusk the poets sing of fading beauty and the women dance with grief on their crimson lips. The golden

dome of the Summer Palace. A boy falling backwards through a window, lit by a thousand glittering shards of mage glass. In Sorlost I saw her face for the first time, radiant, and when I saw her I knew. My hands wallowing for the first time in innocent blood there. In Sorlost I killed a baby, I looked down and I ran my sword through it because I could. Sickness filled him. Fear. He thought: don't think of it. There are so many places to conquer before I have to go back there.

At night he lay with Thalia in the bedroom with the green glass windows, beneath the mage-glass stars. Thalia naked and glowing, bathed in light. He rested his head on her stomach, imagined he could hear the child's heart beating. In the dark inside her body it swam and dreamed. Absurd and impossible.

'I can feel it move,' she said. 'Fluttering inside me. Like a bird. Like a butterfly landing on my hand.' My child! he thought. My child!

He said, 'This time it will live.'

The shadow flickered across his mind. He who had killed his own family. The fear, that it would live.

Alleen Durith held a celebration dinner the last evening before they marched. A private thing, Marith, Thalia, Osen, Kiana Sabryya, Dansa Arual, Ryn Mathen. Alleen's chambers were decked with silk flowers. Marith was noisy, happy, laughing, the lights were very bright, the air smelled fresh and good. Thalia glittered in his vision, silver and bronze, silk and water, summer rain.

‘Do you remember the morning it rained,’ he said to her, ‘in the desert, and the flowers came out pink, and the stream came rushing down?’

Thalia said in surprise, ‘No. I ... I don’t remember.’

‘I remember it so clearly. The way the desert came alive. How can you not—?’ Or ...? ‘No, that was before, wasn’t it? You didn’t see that. We saw the stream with the willows, and that first stream, where we threw pebbles, and I told you who I was. It didn’t rain in the desert when you were there with me. But you’d never seen running water, until I showed you the stream, and you bathed your hands and feet in it ...’

‘No,’ Thalia said, confused. ‘No. I hadn’t. I—’ She smiled then: ‘It was beautiful, Marith, when we saw the stream. I remember that. I’ll never forget that. Like seeing the hawk – was that on the same day?’

The hawk? What about the hawk? ‘We’ll go back there soon,’ he almost said.

‘Drink up, everyone,’ Osen shouted. Bustling around, refilling cups. ‘Tastes like goat’s piss, but we can all manage another cup.’ A good and clever man, Osen Fiolt. A good friend.

‘Goat’s piss? Goat’s piss?’ Alleen raised his cup. ‘I looted this stuff personally, Osen, you barbarian. Horse’s piss, at least.’

Kiana threw a flower at Osen. ‘War horse’s piss. I helped him choose it.’

‘Did that woman ever send a bottle of her good wine?’ asked Thalia.

‘I don’t know.’ Looked at Osen and Alleen. ‘Did she?’

‘I have no idea what you’re talking about, Marith.’ Osen chucked Kiana’s flower at him and shoved over a plate of sweets.

‘I found a girl in Arunmen who can sing like a skylark,’ said Alleen, ‘if anyone’s interested in hearing her sing?’

“‘Sing like a skylark’?” said Kiana. ‘Cousin, really.’

Thalia yawned. ‘I will go to bed, I think, Marith. I’m tired.’ She was very tired, suddenly, the last few days, slept and ate a lot. But she looked well, her face was shining, it would be well, this time, surely, the doctors said that it was good that she was tired, because it showed that the baby was strong. It will live, it must live ... he felt sickened, thinking of it, gulped down his drink, found himself looking away from her. My child. My child. I who killed my mother and my father and all of them, what will my child be if it lives?

‘Stay a bit longer, Marith,’ said Osen. ‘This girl of Alleen’s can sing *The Deed of the New King* and *The Revenge of the King Against Illyr* like a skylark. The proper songs and the dirty versions.’

‘Her dirty version of *The Revenge* is ... dirty,’ said Alleen. ‘You have no idea.’

Osen began to sing, ‘*His big big sword thrusts hard and wide.*’

‘I will certainly go to bed,’ said Thalia.

‘I fear you may be wise, Thalia my queen,’ said Osen. ‘*Whole cities call him to thrust inside.*’

‘Come to bed soon, Marith,’ Thalia said as she left them.

Her hand brushed his arm as she walked away. ‘Won’t you?’ Pregnancy seemed to leave her insatiable. It made her flatulent, also. Slept and ate and farted and wanted to fuck. All the good things.

‘And she sings it completely straight-faced, too,’ said Alleen. ‘A marvel.’

Umm ...? Oh. Yes. ‘Do I really want to hear a woman singing obscene songs about my triumphs?’

‘Of course you do,’ said Alleen.

‘Do I really want to find myself humming it the next time I ...?’

‘Of course you do,’ said Alleen. ‘And it makes me happy just thinking of it. Why else are we conquering all the world, wading through the blood of innocents, if not for people to make you the subject of obscene songs?’

A loud click of metal as Kiana put her cup down. Alleen went white.

‘It’s no worse reason than some.’ Try to laugh. Try to smile. Try to laugh. His face felt so hot. That feeling, that he had had when they were cheering him, singing his name outside the ruined wine shop, joy, bliss, wonder, but I felt shame, he thought, then, hearing them, and I feel shame thinking about it now, and thinking about a girl singing songs about me ... *My eternal fame, my glory, the songs of my triumphs* ... His face felt hot and red. Like it’s humiliating, that they praise me. Like they and I are both wrong, should be ashamed.

My head hurts, he thought. I need to go to bed as well. I should have gone with Thalia just now.

‘I won’t have the girl summoned,’ said Alleen. ‘I’m sorry, I don’t know where that came from. Stay and have another drink, don’t leave looking like that. Please.’

‘One drink.’ It is no worse reason. He’s my friend, I . . .

Osen and Alleen were singing something. Kiana was crying with laughter at it. He was singing it too. He was stumbling back to his chambers. It suddenly seemed to have got very late. The girl had sung like a skylark. Even Kiana had admitted as much. Kiana had smiled at Osen: it would be so good if she was to return Osen’s feelings. Make him happy to see it. Poor old Matrina, Osen’s wife. He had always rather liked Matrina. But Osen liked Kiana. Kiana didn’t seem to like Osen. I wonder if Matrina would like Kiana? he thought.

‘My Lord King!’ his guardsman Tal shouted.

He was blind. Felt like he was being buried in sand. Thrashed about, gods, it was sticky, coating him. Hands flailing. Filth, coming all over him. His skin burning. Itching. Filth coming up through his skin. He had seen a dog once all covered crawling with ticks and sores and lice, its skin its fur moving. His skin was crawling. Erupting. Rotting. He retched. Vomit filling his mouth, vomit and sand, and he tried to swallow it, he couldn’t swallow it, it burned at his lungs, felt it in his nostrils, his eyes bulging, his head going to burst, choking, trying to claw at his nose and mouth. I’m drowning. Gasping to breathe and there was nothing.

His arms and legs trembled. Cold sweat pouring off him. Tore at himself he itched he was crawling his skin was crawling his skin erupting his throat erupting choked blocked crumbling he was choking, drowning, his skin, his throat blocked with filth.

The sound of metal. Voices cheered. A trumpet rang.

Swords, he thought. Fighting. A vast battle, men fighting in their thousands in the hallway around him. A hundred thousand shining sword blades.

Gasped, vomited up sand. On his knees, sand pouring out of his mouth. Great gouts of it, like the dragons pouring out fire. Breathing again. Gasping down air. His throat and lungs raw. Sand and vomit dripping from his nose and mouth.

A shadow stood over him. A thing like a man. Dark, like a shadow, featureless, an outline of a man, like a man's shadow in the half-light, and then it moved, poured itself back towards him, a thing like a man but all formed of black sand, crumbling away as it choked itself over him.

He had seen such things in the ruins of his victories. The destruction of the body in a wave of dragon fire. Flesh and bone turned into black ash.

Its hands reached again for him. Pouring towards his throat.

Buried his hands in it. It came apart around him. Flowed over him. The faceless head pressed towards him. Its arms embraced him. Pouring itself into him.

Threw his hands up over his face. Covered his mouth with his hands, bent down pressing his face into the stone floor. Hugging

him to itself, kissing and devouring him. In his eyes. His ears. His mouth.

Vengeance. Hiss of sand in the wind. Tried to squeeze his eyes closed, tried not to breathe. It clambered itself swarmed itself over him into him. *Vengeance.*

A hand on his shoulder. He sat up.

‘Easy there, My Lord King. Careful.’ Tal helped him up carefully. Propped him against the wall. Marith bent forward and coughed up a last trickle of vomit.

‘Heavy night, was it, My Lord King?’

Blinked, stared down the corridor. ‘There was ... was ...’

Tal helped him up the stairs towards his own chambers; he had hardly gone a few steps when Thalia was rushing down to him, her guard Brychan there beside her with his sword out. Pain in her face when she saw him.

‘Marith!’

‘It’s nothing. Nothing.’

Her foot slipped on a step, he cried out but Brychan caught her arm, then she was beside him.

‘It was nothing,’ said Tal.

Black sand gushed off him. When he looked there was no sand on the floor. Sand crunched in his mouth. He spat. Thalia looked shocked at his spit on the floor. Gleaming. Someone else spat, he thought, I saw a man spit green phlegm at my feet.

‘Have some water, Marith.’ A cup in his hands, heavy goldwork that heaved beneath his fingers. Itching, crawling,

moving. He drank and gulped it down. Tasted so sweet. A grating feeling in his throat as he swallowed. Hair and gristle. Dirt stuck in his throat. His mouth was running with lice. He gagged, his hand over his mouth, don't be sick here in front of her, my wife, do I want my wife to see that? The shame ... once I didn't want her to see my face, because she'd see it there, vomit and death, I'm human fucking vomit, filth like I'm choking down.

Thalia brought all the lamps in the room to burning. They were in their bedchamber. He couldn't remember walking there. The green glass windows were black and hollow, black voids; the lamplight made the mage-glass stars in the ceiling faint and dull. The silver hangings on the bed moved, trembled: the warm air from the lamps, someone had told him, one of the maidservants. Her sweat in the lamplight, running down inside the neck of her dress ... The leaves and flowers on the walls looked too real, like wax flowers. Obscenities like a swollen body. Draw his sword, hack them down to bits. The scabs on his left hand were diseased. The scar tissue alive with parasites. The scars on Thalia's left arm were alive with parasites. The scars on her arm were crusted cracking infested with maggots. His throat was dry with dust.

'You almost slipped,' he said. 'On the stairs.'

'Brychan caught me.' She put her hands over her belly. Her nightgown was very sheer, very fine silk, he could see the swell of the child growing there. No other child had grown this big in her womb. Blood smear things on her thighs. Clots of stinking blood. Pregnancy had made her breasts huge. Sweat on her, between

her breasts, staining the sheer cloth. He felt sick. For a moment it seemed to him that her belly was swollen not with a child but with ash.

‘He’s safe,’ she said. ‘I was worried about you.’

‘He?’

She blinked. ‘Our son.’

‘You know? How can you know?’ I don’t want it to be a boy, he found he was thinking, not a boy, not another murderer, parricide, dead thing, rot thing like I am. Will it kill her, tearing itself out of her? Cut her up into shreds, laugh in her face, curse her, take her heart to pieces slowly over years and years? I don’t want a child. I don’t want a boy. I want it to die like the rest, before it can harm her or I can harm it. It struck him suddenly: it is not dangerous for the mother to lose a child in the first early months.

She said, ‘I ... Of course I don’t know.’

Did I kill them? he thought. The other children? Kill them in her, will them dead, give her poison in her sleep? *I cannot father a living child. One of your generals himself plots to destroy you! Conspires against you!* What if one of them is poisoning her, killing our children?

‘Why do you call it “he”, then? As though you think it will live, as though you pretend it will live?’ A wound, a rotting wound inside her already infected and dead.

‘He will live.’ Her hands clutched over her belly, tight, so tight like she might crush it, smother it in the womb. She was lying,

they both knew it, it would die soon, any day, any moment, like the rest, just let it live let it live.

‘Don’t call it “he”.’

‘I – I want—’ And it came to him sick and horrified that she did not want it to be a girl. Look at her, the former High Priestess of the Great Temple, sacred holy beloved chosen of god who was born and raised to kill children, men dreaming in hot sweat about her hands stabbing them. She doesn’t want to have a daughter any more than I want to have a son. A perfect clarity, as he coughed the black sand of human bodies from his lungs: we both want this child more than all we have in the world, the last hopeful thing left to us, the only reason for anything. A child, to build an empire for. A child, to show our happiness and love. And we both want it to die unborn.

He remembered, so clearly, kissing Ti’s pink screwed-up face, kissing Ti’s pink flailing fist.

‘He will live,’ Thalia said again. ‘We should not be talking about this, Marith. Not now. You’re frightened, angry,’ she said. ‘You need to calm, to sleep.’

‘I saw ...’ I can’t tell you, he thought, not you, I can’t speak it, I can’t have the child, my son, he can’t hear. Black sand crunched between his teeth.

Chapter Eight

It was a nightmare brought on by drink and stupid songs, he thought the next morning. There had been grains of black sand in the bed, he had woken to feel them itching him. A scalding hot bath; he drank and spat water, drank and spat, drank and spat. He still could not speak of what he had seen.

He drank a cup of wine and his mouth felt cleaner. He was dressing when a message was brought that Alleen wanted to see him urgently. Thalia looked at him in fear and surprise.

‘What is it?’

‘How should I know?’

‘Show him in, then.’

Perhaps, he thought for a moment, he should see Alleen alone, without Thalia there.

‘Marith ...’ Alleen was nervous. Excited, afraid. ‘Marith, I’ve someone here you need to see. Now.’

‘I ... Bring him in, then.’ Should I tell Thalia to leave? he almost thought. He could hardly tell her to leave in front of Alleen and the guards prowling around.

What will I do, he thought, if it is coming now that she is the one betraying me? Or Osen? But I love her, and Osen is my best friend.

There was a young man waiting in the bedroom doorway. A servant, from the look of him ... no, Marith looked closer, a

soldier, unarmed and as frightened as Alleen was, but a soldier. Blood smell on him. Bronze and blood ground down onto him, marking him. The man was looking down at his feet, too afraid to look up.

‘Well?’

Gods, he needed a drink.

‘Speak,’ Alleen said.

We’ve been here before, and he’ll say ... Not Thalia. Not Osen. Please. He’ll say it.

‘Lord Erith,’ the man said.

‘Valim Erith offered him gold,’ Alleen said, ‘to kill you. Gold and—’

‘Lord Erith gave me this.’ The man held up a dagger. Carefully, cautiously, between finger and thumb, hanging down like a live thing. Blue fire on the blade. A blue jewel in the hilt. Marith reached for it.

‘Careful!’ Alleen pulled his hand back away. ‘The blade is poisoned, he says.’

‘Poisoned.’ Marith took it, held it up to see the light move in the jewel. Pressed the very tip against his finger, drawing out a single bead of red blood. Heard voices gasp and wince.

‘Valim Erith gave it to you? To kill me? You swear this?’

‘Valim Erith gave it to me, My Lord King, I swear it.’

‘On your own life?’

‘On my own life, My Lord King.’

‘Why you?’ Thalia asked. ‘Who are you?’

A long, stuttering, gasping noise. The poor man. Wretched man, brought to this. He's nobody, Thalia, Marith thought. Some poor man doing as Valim Erith ordered him.

'Speak,' Alleen said harshly.

'My name is Kalth, My Lord King, I am an Islands man, My Lord King, I've been a soldier under Lord Erith since you were crowned king at Malth Elelane, I've fought in every one of your battles since you sailed to Ith, I've fought and survived them all.' There was so much pride in his voice as he said that; his pride filled the room with warmth. 'My brother died at Balkash. My lover died here in Arunmen, on the first day of the siege. Perhaps I ... I said some things I didn't mean, after he died, mourning him. He ... It took him five days to die. So I was angry, and perhaps I said things ... I'm sorry. But Lord Erith – I served him, my family have served the Eriths as soldiers and servants for a hundred years, he himself was a guest at my sister's wedding, but I would not do it, My Lord King, not what he asked me to do.'

'He came to me this morning,' said Alleen. 'He was supposed to do it last night. He hid, came to me instead.' Alleen rubbed his eyes. 'A hangover and four hours' sleep. Curse Valim.'

Thalia said, 'Can we trust him? This man?'

Alleen said, 'Look at him. He has no reason to lie, I think.'

Thalia looked thoughtful. Marith rubbed at his own eyes, 'Have Valim brought in, then. And fetch Osen here.' Valim: yes, it made sense to him, he could see it; Valim whom he had known since he was a child, bright in his bright armour, his hard face,

a proud young man in King Illyn's hall. Not a friend. A friend of his father's.

Valim Erith was brought in shaking his head, chained, guards all around him. His eyes bulged when he saw Kalth. But he did not speak.

'You conspired to kill me.' It was not a question. Managed to keep the question out of his voice. He remembered Valim Erith from when he was a child. A stern, cold man. He had always known that beneath the cold Valim Erith was weak.

'Why?' What do I expect, Marith thought, that he'll say anything more than anyone else ever does? The same old same old things, the same words, *the Altrersyr are vile and poison and hateful and should be wiped off the face of the world and I, I alone will manage it ...*

'Where did you get the knife?' Osen asked Valim.

Valim said in a whisper, 'It's not mine. I have never seen it before.'

'Your man has told us everything, Valim,' Thalia said, 'stop lying.'

Marith held the knife up close to Valim's face. 'Was it you the prisoner was talking about? One of my generals, betraying me. You.' Brought the knife so close to Valim's face.

In the eyes. His own eyes itched and burned.

In the eyes. The blue jewel in the knife handle, blue as Thalia's eyes. Is that some joke?

'Are you killing my children?' he shouted at Valim. 'Are you

making my children die in the womb? What are you giving her, to make it happen?’

In the eyes. So close to the eyes. His own face, reflected there. The knife, reflected there.

Thalia moaned in pain at that.

‘Are you conspiring against me? Are you?’

Kill him. Kill all of them.

I don’t want the child to live. Thalia doesn’t want the child to live. Thank him.

Valim said, ‘No. Marith. No. No. No. No. No. No. No.’ A flood of filth coming out of his mouth. Puking out his lies.

‘Stop it,’ Marith almost screamed at him. All the voices, so many, his own: no don’t do this please please no please. ‘No no no no no. Marith, no,’ Valim screamed.

Alleen said, ‘You cannot possibly have thought Arunmen would be able to defeat us.’

‘You were the one who brought the Arunmenese ringleader in to judgement,’ said Osen. ‘Gods, you snake.’

‘No,’ Valim whispered. ‘No.’ He stared at Marith, pleading. Stared at the knife. His body slumped. ‘I followed you, I loved you, I ... You are my king, Marith ... My son died for you ... Marith!’ His voice rose again screaming. ‘It wasn’t me! You cannot believe this! You are my king! Always! Always!’ Scrabbled towards Marith, chains rattling stupidly. Dead body on a gibbet. ‘Always!’

Marith took up the knife again. Blue fire blue jewel. Fine

bronze blade. A good weapon, well-balanced. It felt good in his hand. Could imagine it, very easily, sinking in. Now he knew it was poisoned, he could see a slight sheen to the killing edge. A slight scent, even, sweetish, dirty, reminding him of childhood sickness, over the cold smell of the bronze. His finger ached, where he had pricked himself with the knife. Wondered if this really could have harmed him.

‘Curse you! Curse you!’ A pause, a sudden look on Valim’s face like a cruel sly child: ‘I wish now that I had done these things.’ Then Valim said nothing more. Silent, hate in his eyes, as Marith killed him. The man Kalth screamed and shrieked, tried to break away, ended up on his belly wriggling, pleading, mass of snot and tears, clawing at the ground. Tal and Brychan killed him.

The wounds on Valim’s corpse blackened. Smoked and crumbled away. Black slugs, crawling over the knife wounds.

‘Bury it. Bury the knife, too.’ The first man to touch the corpse leapt back screaming. His fingers turned black. They had to wrap the body in raw hides, bloody and dripping, before they could carry it off. They threw Kalth’s body on top, shovelled the earth fast over it. Marked it with a pile of white stones: this place is cursed, keep away.

There was a sense of relief, afterwards. Marith felt a kind of lightness in him. Purged. Younger, brighter men than Valim around him. It must have been Valim. It must. Don’t speak more of it. Ignore it. His skin crawled running crawling with lice sand in his throat. Never speak of it.

‘He was never part of it, not like we are,’ Osen said, ‘he was thick with your father, gods know how long he has been plotting it.’

‘Filth,’ said Alleen. ‘You heard him at the end, confess it. “*I had done these things*”. I’ve been through the men who fought under him,’ Alleen said. ‘Had a good think and killed a couple of them.’

Thalia frowned, looked troubled, agreed it was for the best. ‘Are you sure, Marith? That it was Valim Erith?’

‘Yes.’

‘It just seems ... I don’t know ...’

Too neat, is I think what you may be saying, Thalia my wife. But blink it and drink it away. If it was more complicated than that, well. It’s done You did it, I think, or Osen, or someone all of you my dead children my unborn son. Valim Erith probably deserved it for something. Sand crunched in his mouth. So don’t think of it, don’t talk of it. Close your eyes, point at the map, give an order, march on.

The Army of Amrath left Arunmen behind it. Marched south through the wheat fields of Tarn Brathal, following the course of the sacred river Alph. The river ran cold through frosted landscapes. The earth was fresh and hard, the horses pushed on eagerly, the men marched singing, their voices crisp in the cold, puffing out their breath as they went. ‘Marith! Marith Altrersyr, *Ansikanderakesis Amrakane!* Death! Death! Death!’ Tereen, he besieged and destroyed, despite it having sworn allegiance to

him as king. They had been lying. They would have betrayed him eventually, as Arunmen had. Risen up, cast off his rule, cursed him. Thus better to get it over with. The city fell and he went through the streets killing anything in his path, and he felt triumph and shame and relief. *Filth. Rot. Corruption. They all loathe you, King Ruin. Want to see you dead.* They deserve this, he thought. They would have come to this in the end.

Samarnath, he loosed his dragons on. A champion came out, dressed in black armour, a mage blade running with blue fire in his hand. 'Fight me, Marith Altrersyr! Amrath! Fight me, I will destroy you! I have sworn it! Fight!' They fought together, Marith and the challenger, wrestled and hacked at each other while all the living men and the dead looked on. He is invulnerable. He is death and ruin. He ached and stumbled and sweated and his mouth tasted of dust and blood and vomit, and he killed the fool in his black armour and sent him crashing down to the earth where his teeth stirred up the dust.

On again, still southwards, leaving the river Alph behind them. At its mouth was a great delta, a thousand miles of marshland, reeds and waterfowl, the people there lived on islands made of reeds, in huts raised up on poles above the water, in houseboats that rocked on the tide. They lived by hunting and fishing, prowled the wetlands on stilts looking like the wading birds they sought. Some of the marsh dwellers, it was said, had never set foot on firm hard ground. Stone to them was a marvel, more precious than bronze or iron: and what use was iron, indeed,

when it rusted away in the constant damp? They worshipped the mud and the waterbirds, believed that the world was hatched from the egg of a giant black-winged crane. It might have been pleasant, Marith thought, to visit there, go hunting in the marshes, it was the season when the cranes would be gathering there to breed, from Theme, Cen Elora and Mar and all of Irlast. The sky would be dark with them; their wingbeats were said to make a sound like heavy rain. It was almost Sunreturn: back home on the White Isles it would be icy cold, dark even at midday, but here they were moving south, the air was warmer, the air had a different feel on the face, a new taste in the mouth.

The marshes were dying. Scouts brought the news in, proud and delighted to be the first to tell him. The waters of the Alph brought down rotting bodies, blood, disease, banefire, ash. The marshes choked on the poisoned waters, the reeds withered, the birds and the fish floated on the surface of the water bloated and green. Children sickened, their lives dribbling out of their mouths. Babies were stillborn. The old and the weak died of hunger. The strong died of grief.

So not much point going there, then, to hunt and boat. The cranes, the scouts said, were dying in such numbers that the channels of the river were choked with their bodies and their unhatched eggs.

The river is cursed. From being sacred, it is a river of death. It is punishing you, King Marith, by destroying itself. It worships you, you see? They marched instead for the Forest of

Calchas, fragrant cedar wood, wild pears, walnut trees. Burned it. The dragons swept over it, belched fire, and the smell of the burning was sweet, as it always was. The flames, like the water, worshipping Marith the king.

Another feast, by the light of the forest burning. Osen had found a troop of acrobats who could jump and tumble higher than should be possible, they wore bells sewn over their costumes, mirrors on their costumes and on masks covering their faces and their hair. The air was warm, they could sit beneath the open sky. A great wall of flame and smoke to the west. The flames must be visible in Issykol, even on the shores of the Small Sea.

A cheer rose up in the distance. The whole camp was celebrating, the army enjoying itself. Singing and music. It would be lovely, Marith thought, to wander down there, join them, dance and drink with them as a man among them.

‘The Battle of Geremela!’ the lead acrobat shouted. The troop formed itself into two sides, took up long poles painted bronze. They vaulted, climbed the poles, flipped and darted over and under each other; clashed the poles together in the air; fell and leapt back up. It did look like a battle, a little, if one had never seen a battle. Osen and Alleen Durith cheered and clapped, their eyes very bright. ‘Do you remember?’ ‘Do you remember?’ ‘Do you remember?’ Gods. He could remember everything, every sword stroke, only had to close his eyes and he was back there. That moment, kicking his horse to charge down on the Ithish ranks, his men and his shadows following him. He had been

the point of an arrow, the tip of a sarriss. That moment as he struck the Ithish ranks. So long ago now it seemed. The acrobats unfurled red scarves, whipped them behind them as they leapt, red banners snapped out from the tops of their poles. Bodies falling, leaping over each other. A final clash of all the poles together, the red silk burst over them, a girl threw a clay pot into the air, struck it with her pole to break it: white silk flowers showered down. ‘Hail King Marith! Hail King Marith!’ the troop shouted in unison.

Oh, that was lovely. Nothing like Geremela, but lovely. The acrobats bowed, a servant passed him a pouch of gold to throw to them.

‘Very clever. Very fine. Where did you find them?’

Osen was beaming, ‘Samarnath. Good, aren’t they? And the girl there, the one who threw the pot at the end ... the things she can do ...’

Kiana tossed her head at that, like she didn’t care. Which she didn’t. But who wants to be scorned even if they don’t return their suitor’s ardent love? Now you have a wife and a child and a true love and an acrobat mistress, Osen, Marith thought. A positive crowd of women. It was pleasing. The second most powerful man in Irlast shouldn’t just be moping about after Kiana Sabryya. And Alleen has his foul-mouthed singer; isn’t it a joy to see my friends so happy in love? Why else are we conquering all the world, wading through the blood of innocents, if not to meet beautiful young women with unusual talents?

A few days later he led an assault on a village fortress on the coast south of Calchas, a bandits' nest, nothing of importance save that it sat on their march bristling with spears, could sit thus on their rear as a threat. Three days alone in command of fifty men, sleeping without tents or blankets under clear skies brilliant with stars, then a short sharp fight hand-to-hand at the end. The fortress was built over a spring of ice-cold water, tasting strongly of iron, Marith bathed in it, drank great gulps of it, it washed away any last memory of sand crunching in his mouth. When he got back to the army Thalia said his hair was curlier, too, from washing in it. In the bandits' treasure store there was a necklace of rose-pink rubies, made for her, surely, and a string of green pearls that she gave away to Alleen's foul-mouthed skylark-tongued girl. 'Osen is happier, also,' Thalia said, 'than he has been. His acrobat is good for him.' She laughed in bafflement at these men.

'Why was Valim Erith such a fool?' Marith asked. 'Why? When he could have been part of this?'

Thalia opened her mouth to speak. Shook her head. 'Because he was a fool,' she said. 'I don't know.'

Thalia dreamed still of sweet water, wild places, birds: the feel of water, the smell of water, would be good for the child, she said. They made a fast ride to the shores of the Small Sea, Marith and Thalia, Osen and Alleen and Kiana and Ryn Mathen, camped there, watched the sun rise over the water. There was a great mystery in its waters, which in places were saltier than the

Bitter Sea, in places sweet and fresh, safe to drink. One could swim, even, between areas of the two. It was the season in which the birds of the Small Sea raised their young, and the sky was filled with them, white feathers floated on the water's edge.

‘We will take our daughter here.’ He stretched out full-length on the grass. He could no longer rest his head in Thalia’s lap but she ran her fingers through his hair. ‘We can teach her to swim in the water – much nicer than the freezing ponds I learnt in. The White Isles in winter, for snow and sledging and skating. Illyr in the summer, when the meadows are full of wild flowers for her to run through, as high as the top of her head. The shores of the Small Sea in the spring and the autumn, when it does nothing on the White Isles but rain and Ti and I would go mad stuck indoors for weeks.’

A great flock of white egrets came down on the water together, churning the water up, sending waves lapping against the sand on which they sat. So thickly packed that where they floated together they looked like an island. There were said to be dolphin in the water, and silver-coloured fish with long yellow curling hair like women. On the further shore the river Ekat ran down from the Mountains of the Heart, tasting of honey, the mountains were so high and so shrouded in ice that no one knew where in the mountains it rose. Some said the river Ekat was the tears of a dragon chained to a mountain. Some said it welled up from a great cavern glittering with diamonds, that led down to another world beneath. Some said there was a valley in the

Mountains of the Heart where the people had wings like birds. Some said there was a city in the Mountains of the Heart where dragon princes lived.

Osen said, ‘When we get to Mar, the far south coast ... we’ll have marched from the furthest north to the furthest south, when we get to Pen Amrean. The far end of the world. The Sea of Tears, and they say it goes on forever until you are no longer sailing on water but on ... light, perhaps, or mist.’ He shrugged. ‘Until nothing. No one has ever sailed out, to come back. Unless they have tales of it in Mar or in Pen Amrean.’

‘I should like to see it,’ Thalia said. They had stood on the cliffs of the far north coast of Illyr, looking into the northern sea that has no end: ‘I should like to see it here at the south,’ Thalia said.

‘We can set up a marker there,’ said Osen. ‘They say the sea is warm there, the sea winds smell of spices there and the cliffs are silver-shining. An empire stretching from sea to sea. A tower, a monument, a mirror-image of the tower of Ethalden, silver and pearl. A tower greater and more beautiful than Ethalden, a palace, a house of glory for the king who had conquered from the furthest north to the furthest south, a monument to all his victories.’

Yes. On and on. On and on. Alleen shouted in agreement. Marith said, very quietly, ‘And then what we will do?’

‘Then what will we do?’

The sound of men’s feet, marching. The flash of their bronze spears held high. ‘*Don’t abandon us, My Lord King!*’ ‘*Pension us off, will you?*’ ‘*Pay us, you bastard shit!*’ Marith and Thalia,

Marith and Osen, sitting by the fireside, children rolling happily at their feet, Marith and Osen have well-combed long beards, Thalia is stout and grey. Marith said, ‘When we have conquered the world. When there is nothing left to conquer. What will we do?’

Thalia sat up, looked at him. Osen said, laughing, ‘What do you want to do?’

‘Eralad, Issykol, Khotan, Mar, Allene, Maun, Medana, Sorlost ...’ The awkwardness in his voice again, Osen was frowning, still trying to think it was fooling, Thalia made a little laugh noise in her throat to show she understood, and he brushed it away. ‘Chathe is our ally, Immish is our ally.’ Counting the places off on his fingers as he named them. ‘And then ... we’ve conquered the world. There’s nothing left. So what will we do?’

‘That’s still a lot of places still to conquer, Marith,’ Ryn Mathen the King of Chathe’s cousin said.

‘Fewer places than we’ve conquered already, Ryn.’

Kiana said, ‘Pol Island. The Forest of Maun where there are a thousand miles of wilderness where a man has never been.’

‘Ae-Beyond-the-Waters!’ said Alleen Durith. ‘If Ae-Beyond-the-Waters is even a real place!’

‘That bit of rock off the coast of Allene!’ Osen shouted. ‘Those bits off rock off Maun’s coast! Places we’ve made up!’

Thalia grasped his hand. ‘Marith—’

‘Yes! We’ll load the Army of Amrath aboard a flotilla of war ships, sail away into the west. Ae-Beyond-the-Waters. Places that

do not and cannot exist. All of them! How glorious, we'll conquer the sea, the waves beneath the ships' keels, all the creatures of the land and the water, all the birds of the air, we'll conquer the sky and the rain and the wind and the snow and the summer heat. Tear the sun and the moon from the sky and trample them. Rip out the stars of heaven and give them to my men. *To the eternal glory of the god Amrath! From the sea-eaten shore to the grey of the mountains, from the north to the south, from the sunrise to the sunset, to the end of the world, we will hail Him king!* Do you think they will be satisfied if I give them the stars to rape and pillage? Do you?"

'Marith,' Thalia said to him quietly. He thought he saw her belly move, where the child kicked.

'And by then the cities of Irlast will have been rebuilt, their towers and their walls will shine bright again, their armies, their treasuries, swords, spears, helms of bronze, and we can go around and do it all again. And again. And again.'

'Don't abandon us, My Lord King!' *'Pay us, you cheap bastard shit!'* Thalia's hand dug into his wrist.

'We'll go round and round Irlast killing and burning, round and round and round and round. Pay them to rebuild, so we can sack them again! Rebuild them ourselves then tear them down! I've got all the money in the world now, after all. What else is there to bloody do?'

'Stop,' said Thalia. 'Marith.'

He laughed and sat down and thought he would break down

sobbing. 'What else is there to bloody do?'

Silence.

'Let's go for a swim, Osen,' said Alleen at last. 'They've caught us a feast of fish for dinner, come and swim while they cook it.'

They slept that night on great rafts floating on the water, like waterlilies, a thing that the people who had once lived there were said to have done. It was pleasant enough.

They marched on south down the coast. Issykol he drowned in a storm. Ranene the weather hand's masterwork: black sky, black sea with white waves, rain so heavy it bruised the skin. The earth turned to liquid. The earth and the sky and the sea and the wind and the rain blurred into one howling, screaming maelstrom. This was what the world was like before sea and sky became separate, at the dawning of all things before sea and sky and land were formed. The soldiers huddled in dug-out shelters. The storm downed them. The storm buried them. The storm ripped them away screaming into the air. Marith stood out in it, face thrown back, arms raised to the wind.

'Like rainfall, like storms in the desert, drowning, engendering, Soaking the parched earth and washing away all that survives there.'

The Song of the Red Year. The storm drowns all to recreate it. Only through death can the world be remade. Beautiful. Like all illusions. The wind tore at his hair, the rain poured over him, the force of it almost overpowering him. The waves shattered cliff tops. The wind tore down buildings, uprooted trees. Like a child

bored while his mother tends her garden, and he plucks leaves, breaks off flowers, snaps fresh green stems. The world was mud and ruin. Dead bodies floated on the mud. Broken stonework. The remains of houses. The remains of ships. The city drowned and gone.

The storm died. Clear pale sky.

The joy of it faded in Marith. Ranene crouched at his feet, exhausted.

‘It ... is done,’ said Ranene, wheezing out tired breath.

‘Good. Well done. We’ll have a feast tonight and you’ll have the place of honour.’

Turned away from the ruin before him, his eyes already fixed south on the ashes of the forests, the high mountain peaks.

‘Then tomorrow we’ll march on. Khotan. The Mountains of Pain.’ Thinking, thinking, how to destroy them. ‘Turain. Pen Amrean. Allene.’

Sorlost.

The dragons circled overhead. Like gulls. Circling in the clear washed liquid sky. They are laughing, he thought. They were wise beyond all imagining, all the wisdom in the world was there in their eyes. Thus they knew. Valim’s voice, cursing him: *You are my king. Always. I wish now that I had done these things.*

Thalia stared at the mud with big sad mother’s eyes. He’d played in the puddles with Ti and once he’d pushed Ti over and Ti had pulled him down after him, they’d got soaked through, ruined their clothes, their nursemaid had been whipped, their

mother had scolded them.

On. On.

Chapter Nine

The storm passes, the sun comes out, and the earth is shining. I had forgotten what it feels like in the warmth of the south. Damp heat, lush with growing, not the dry deserts of my other life. We go riding together, away from the columns marching. Up into the mountains, feel the spray from the river where it comes down in a waterfall over a gorge, sends up rainbows, there is snow up there on the highest peaks, the ground is mossy, soft as silk pillows, the high meadows are so rich in flowers the gold of their petals shines on the skin. We find a lake up there, clear as mirrors, the birds of the mountain are reflected in it, Marith smiles and says it is almost as blue as my eyes. 'Our child must have your eyes,' he tells me. 'Your eyes, and your skin, and my hair.' The Mountains of Pain, the mountains are called. They are sharp as blades. But I cannot see pain in them. They are beautiful. Not a place for men, no, very few live here, if one goes too high into the mountains one's breath is said to come heavy, the head feels dizzy, in the snow at the heights a man can sicken and die. But they are not things of pain. The name is from a story, I am told, a woman, a princess of Turain with black skin and silver hair, very beautiful, and her heart was broken, and she raised up the mountains so that she might live alone there, in solitude. Her pain, alone.

Yellow cranes fly up from the south to build their nests in the mountain heights. Wild goats with horns as sharp as sarriss

points; mountain eagles; grey wildcats that have no shadow as they hunt in the dusk. Walnut trees. Peach trees. Rose trees. Trout and perch in the rivers. Gellas fowl. Wild peacocks. Meadows like a carpet unfurled, cloth laid out in a market place. In the valleys the earth is good, golden woodlands, fields basking in the sun and watered by streams from the mountain heights, the crops grow up so fast here that the mountain people can gather three harvests a year; in the gardens the trees are so heavy with fruit that it does not need to be bought and sold, one can simply reach out to take. Here, in the warmth, we rest the soldiers, load ourselves with supplies, let the horses rest and fatten. The dragons are gone into the mountains. Weary, after the great labours they have done for us. We settle ourselves in the foothills, build a city of soldiers' tents. The men of the mountains come to do us honour, kneel before us, crown us with silver, offer up gifts of animal skins and sweetwood and wine and fruit. 'Dragon King', they call Marith. He smiles radiant at that. They call me 'Queen of Flowers'. We hold feast days and games, the Army of Amrath parades, dances, sings songs, stages races and mock fights. The winners are crowned as we are with flowers and gold. There are weddings, celebrations of births and birthdays, commemorations of our dead. Osen talks of writing a book, a history of our conquests, until Alleen Durith laughs him out of it.

'What will we do, when we have conquered the world?' I say to Marith. 'We will do this. Celebrate and enjoy ourselves, fill the world with music and dancing and poems. Pass all this beauty on

to our children and their children after them.'

Marith tries to smile. 'We have sacked all the great cities of the world, Thalia. Killed all the poets and the musicians who live in them.'

'As you said, we will rebuild them. More beautiful than before. Never mind offering your soldiers a farm each: every soldier in the Army of Amrath can hold court in a palace in a great city, with retainers and painters and poets.'

He rubs his eyes. But I lived for twenty years in one building, I fasted, I killed, I knelt in the darkness with a knife in my hand, I knelt in the blinding light for days without sleep. If there is nothing else for our armies to do ... yes, we can sack them again and again. If there is nothing else for us to do.

The child is growing so strong inside me, I feel her swimming within me, moving like a fish. Soon she will be born. Sometimes now she kicks so strongly Marith can feel it, if he puts his hand on my belly. 'Quickly, quickly!' I call to him, and he puts his hand where I show him. 'I feel it!' he cries. The wonder of it, each time, he laughs and shouts like a child himself, for pure longing joy. 'My daughter,' he says to it, he kisses my belly where it lies. The baby kicks and wriggles within me, as if she too is delighted by it.

I say to him, 'We won't have time to conquer any more of the world, when we have our children to bring up.'

I want my child to grow up happy and contented. Never to know hunger or helplessness. I want to give her a rich good life, far better than my own. I want her to have everything, wealth,

status, for her life to be free from want, from sorrow, from grief. I want her life to be perfect. I would put my child's life above others' lives, I would do anything for this child inside me. Is this also a bad thing?

No one, I am certain, has thought or done such a thing before. You, I am sure, have never thought these things.

In the blazing light and heat of the south we celebrate Sunreturn. 'Year's Renewal,' I say; Marith says with a laugh, 'You heathen, it's called Sunreturn.' 'There is no need for it to return,' I say back to him, 'you barbarian, look – the days are no shorter, the sun has not gone.' He shakes his head, 'True, true. But in my empire, Sunreturn is its right name.' Indeed: such an absurd joke to us in the city of Sorlost the city of the dawn, that the people of the north should fear the death of the sun, this fool's idea that the sun is so fragile. Sunreturn and Sun's Height, what a strange joke! Yet I find that I miss the long days of the north. In Illyr, the summer days were so long I would go to bed sometimes when the sun was still golden, the light in the air as I lay waiting for sleep would be comforting. Like sleeping wrapped in light. I would fall asleep to the sound of birdsong; wake in the morning to a world already brilliant with light.

On the feast day the fires of the camp from the mountain are like stars; the air rings with song; the servants are garlanded with hyacinths, they have spread the floor of our tent with rose petals, Osen Fiolt brings us crowns of white blossom, caught and frozen, alive, cold with frost. A new gown is waiting for me, rosy silk so

fine it looks as though I am wearing the dawn sky. A necklace of spun gold flowers, delicate as breath. There is music and singing. Silver bells ringing in the air above our heads. We drink perfumed yellow wine out of diamond cups. Poets tell of his triumphs, the beauty of his battles: *The Deeds of the New King*, *The Ruin of Tyrenae*; *The Fall of Tereen*. Osen Fiolt raises his cup in a toast to us. As the others join him, gold and silver stars begin to fall from the ceiling of the tent. Outside, in the warm summer darkness, the soldiers dance in their costumes of branches and bones and ribbons, run and leap with burning torches to light up the night. 'Luck! Luck!' their voices shout. Inside me, I feel the child kick. Alleen's servant girl begins to sing, her voice sweet and soft as honey, warm, rich. A man beside her accompanies her on an ivory flute. She claps her hands, stamps her feet as she sings, a fast rhythm, joyful. She has the heavy accent of Illyr; I think, from the words I can understand, that she is singing of Amrath and Eltheia, how much He loved her and she loved Him. Dansa Arual gets to her feet, begins to dance. Alleen Durith joins her, and Osen Fiolt, soon almost everyone is dancing. Marith sits and watches beside me, until Dansa Arual grabs his hands and I tell him to join them. The tent smells of crushed flowers, rose petals kicked up by dancing feet.

In the grey light of the next morning, a pain grips my belly. I see the sun rise, I lie awake in the first light with the sounds of revelry around me. I begin to bleed.

When the sun sets in the evening, my child is dead.

Marith sits at my bedside, and we both knew that this would happen, and we both scream with grief. The greatest pain a human heart can endure, I am told, to lose a child, and I believe it. Marith's voice, calling the shadows, his eyes are dragon eyes: 'No. No. Please. Please. Just let her live.' I hold her, for a little while. She moved, once, after she was born, her mouth opened, her eyes opened, she opened and closed the fingers of her hands, balled them into fists. Marith says that she did. Swears that she did. She is very cold in my arms, but very soft. She has tiny fingers all wrinkled up. She has tiny fingernails. Her ears are like tiny shells, she has fine black hair almost like feathers all over her head. Her skin is red-brown. Like apples. Her eyes are closed and I cannot bear to know what colour her eyes are. Her eyelashes are long and black. She has a smell on her like blood and like the sweat of a clean body after running, and like something else that I cannot describe and will never forget and already forget.

They say that an unborn child's heartbeat sounds like horses' hooves galloping. A healer woman came to our tent once, pressed her head to my belly, listened, drummed her fingers on a stone to beat out the sound of my child's heart. 'It is strong, your child,' she told us. 'Listen. It sounds like your army racing into battle, My Lady Queen, My Lord King.' But that child died inside me, unformed, a little smear of dark blood. It was not strong. We were camped in Cen Elora, then, when my last child died. The great pine forests that grow on the shore of the Closed Sea. The floor of our tent was soft, from being pitched on pine mast, the

air smelled of resin and wood smoke, the flames of our campfires would flicker up suddenly green and blue. The woods were very silent, empty of birds or animals. The streams in the woodlands were very clear, dark and empty also. There is something in the pine needles, in the resin from the trees, Marith said, that makes the water unpleasant for creatures to live in. The stream beds were fine gravel; one night our tent was pitched beside a deep pool, delicious for bathing. Purple iris grew up beside it, ringing it like a garland. We ate venison roasted over pinewood, fragrant with pinesmoke. My last child died the next day. We marched on three days later, I was still bleeding, horses' hooves drummed on the earth. One of my guardsmen brought me the skin of a marten, made into a scarf. That evening they paraded before my wagon, red banners and trumpets, drum beats, hoof beats. 'Hail to the queen! Hail to the queen!' They did not know how to comfort me and they were trying to comfort me. Again, now, they will try to comfort me.

They take her away. My dead child. Someone takes her, wraps her in red cloth. I cannot bear the feel of my arms where I was holding her. She weighed nothing at all and they take her and it feels as though I was holding a great weight that is gone. Like I am looking around having been holding something that I have forgotten, panicked, what was it that I have dropped? Her face was perfect. Like a painting of a child's face. Already I cannot remember it, what she looked like, what she smelled like. My hands smell of her but I cannot remember it, name it, her scent.

I weep. Marith weeps and howls. We cannot make any human sound.

But admit it: somewhere, deep down, you think that we deserve this. You believe we deserve this.

PART TWO

Chapter Ten

Tobias the bastard-hard sellsword failed fucking assassin
waste of bloody space

The camp of the Army of Amrath, the scourge of the world, the conquerors, the bloodletters, the plague-bringers, the despoilers of all that lives, somehow in some complicated way kind of his friends

‘More porridge? It’s calling your names, lads ...’

‘It’s calling out for something, certainly.’

‘So put it out of its misery and finish it, won’t you?’

‘Its misery? What about my misery having to eat it?’

‘Mercy, mercy, I’ll do anything, mercy! Just don’t offer me any more of that porridge, please!’

‘I’ll have another bowl, if it’s going.’

‘Ah, gods, hear that? Clews wants another bowl. Make sure you’re marching well upwind, yeah?’

‘Better out than in, man. Better out than in.’

‘That goes for the porridge, too.’

‘Piss off, man. You want to be the cook, you can be the bloody cook.’

‘That was my damned bag you just dripped porridge on!’

A troop of fresh new soldier boys finishing up their breakfast, their armour so new and shiny, their faces so young and ardent; it was positively freakish, to see them beside the old hands.

Tobias sat and watched them for a bit. Kind of pleasure/pain in it. Like probing a wound with a fingernail. Seemed to be becoming more and more of a masochist in his old age.

Regrets? I've had a few. But if I could fix one moment in all my life ... Warp and weft of it, backwards and forwards, some company of an evening, two hot meals a day, the odd barrel of strong drink. Him and Geth and Skie, the lads with their innocent killer's faces, playing dice and arguing and ignoring him and Geth and Skie when they ordered them to stop arsing around and polish their kit and then get some sleep. The Free Company of the Sword, a troop of bastard-hard sellswords and lonely blokes with no other job prospects. An old name, if not a famous one. Well-known in certain select political circles. Specialized in stabbing people in the back. Skie the commander-in-chief, thinker, broker, scariest hardest hardman Tobias had ever met. Tobias and Geth the squad commanders, hard-bitten, respected, maybe even kind of father figures to the squad boys, certainly both agreed they felt guilty when they stabbed the squad boys in the back. To be fair to Tobias, the clients did pay a lot more if the job included stabbing the squad boys in the back. 'It's good here,' one of the squad boys had said to him, 'don't you think?'

Recruited some new boys. And one of them was Marith pissing Altrersyr may his godsdamned kingly dick rot off with pox. Decided it would be a great idea to stab Skie and Geth in the back and strike out on his own, Commander-in-Chief Tobias, build up a new troop around him, be his own man, do his own

thing. Or just retire, drink beer, find himself a woman, keep her well enough she'd grit her teeth and ignore him getting fat and sweaty and farting all night.

Yes. Well. The best laid plans and all that, if ifs and buts were pots and pans, etc etc to the bitter clichéd end. Think it would be fair to say things didn't entirely go quite to plan there, yup.

Four years, Tobias the bastard-hard sellsword had been floating around following in the Army of Amrath's wake. His leg hurt where he'd once jumped out of a bloody window. His arm hurt, where Marith shitting Altrersyr had once stabbed him. His ribs hurt, his knees hurt, his frigging arse somehow hurt, hair was grey and thinning, his gut hung over his belt-buckle and he did indeed fart all night. 'We can kill him, we can stop him, we can ... we can do something. Right?' And lonely. One man, stumbling along.

There had been others, once: Raeta, Landra. *Friends*. Raeta was ... not human. Antlers. Claws. Wings. Green leaves, wet earth. Life god wild god thing. '*I am his death, Tobias,*' Raeta had whispered. '*I am his death, I will follow him and follow him, I will destroy him.*' Raeta the life god was four years dead. Landra Relast had finally fucked off two years back. 'We have to destroy him, we have to kill him, I will find a way to destroy him, I will, I swear it.' She had sounded the voice of reason. But there had been something in her face that made him glad, still, that she had gone off alone. Her eyes were like a wild dog's eyes. Running her hands over a knife blade, whispering her father's name and her

brother's name, promising them vengeance. Sometimes thought of her and shivered, right down inside his manhood. Raeta ... Landra ... Gods and monsters ... *'It's worse than he is,'* Landra had cried out once, before Raeta died. And he might almost understand that, thinking of Raeta's eyes, dying. Thinking of Landra's eyes in the last days before she left him. 'Kill him. Kill him.' Grinding her teeth whispering it in her sleep. Wild dog's eyes, wild dog's moaning howling, 'We have to kill him.' So bloody empty, she'd looked. 'I will be his death, Tobias. I will end this. I will stop him.' Thank the gods he himself was old and sore and ached.

Gods. Shivered now. Anyway. They're gone, like rainfall. Don't think of them. Four years, Tobias the bastard-hard sellsword been floating around old and sore and farting, marching up and down behind the army. 'I'll think of something, right? Okay?' I'm not complicit in this shit that's happening here. I'm a hero, me. I'm following him around because one day, one day, when he's old and sick and abandoned and ruined and his army's left him and he's nothing, I'll still fuck up and fail to kill him. If Landra's a wild dog, I'm just a fucking dog too. I'm walking here in the darkness in his footsteps forever. Following him because there's nothing else. This is all there is of the world. The fire burning hot and light and there is no heat and there is no light. I can't kill him. Terrified to even think of killing him. But I'm alive. Just about.

'Gods and demons, look at that, Clews has finished the whole

of his second bowl.’

‘Clews, man, your insides must be made of bronze.’

‘Iron, Turney, mate. My insides are made of iron.’

‘So ... your insides are rusting away, then? That would explain a lot.’

‘Petros, mate, you see this empty bowl ...?’

‘I see it, Clews. I’m thinking of giving you a special medal, in fact, for emptying it.’

‘Oh yeah? Oh yeah?’ The whole company turned to Clews, who in turn turned to Turney. Ooooh. There going to be a fight?

They were getting bored. Arrived ready and eager, ‘March like all hells, lads, no slacking now, got a war to fight,’ halfway across the whole of Irlast, ‘you’ll be men, soon, laddies, real men, you just need to bloody get there,’ and now they were waiting around in a mountain valley in the middle of nowhere, five days now just sitting here, no slaughter no looting no torture no rape. Okay, so Sunreturn had been fun and games, if a bit weird here in the south, they could use a day afterwards to rest, yes, but now it was over lads like these needed to get on. The latrine trenches were filled to overflowing, apart from anything else.

Rumour going round that the queen was ill. That was why they were hanging around. Obvious what ‘ill’ means, in a pregnant woman. Nobody dared say it. But.

Don’t. Just don’t.

The lads’ squad commander turned up, bawled at them to get themselves sorted out, they were marching in an hour or so, look

at the bloody state of them, thought he'd told them twice already to polish their bloody kit. The lads shuffled up grumbling, faffing around in time-honoured fashion with random bits of stuff.

'And get that bloody cookpot cleaned up. It stinks. Looks less like food, more like someone sneezed in it. Cleaned. Now. You, Petros.'

'Me?'

'Chuck it away, mate,' Clews said. 'We'll be in Turain, soon. Famous for their metalwork, they are, the people of Turain.' They'd never even heard of Turain before yesterday, Tobias thought. No idea where it is. Don't think they're even pronouncing it right. Good King Marith could just be making these places up.

The lads got themselves sorted, Petros humming *Why We March* like it was a love song, Turney having lost half his equipment, Clews regretting out loud having to march on two full bowls of the porridge.

'Turain, here we come!'

'Woop woop!'

Tobias wandered off. Gods. Fucking gods. Tears in his eyes. We were all that bloody innocent, once.

His own belongings were the basic definition of basic. A blanket. A cookpot. A couple of spare shirts and leggings. A spare pair of boots. The blanket was silk velvet, a stunning deep emerald green with a pattern of silver flowers, seed pearls crusted around the edge. The cookpot was copper and had an

enamelled handle in the shape of a peacock, its tail fan spreading across the side of the pot. The shirts, leggings and boots must have been made for a prince. Several princes, as none of them matched. The Army of Amrath and the second army of camp followers following it marched around looking like peacocks themselves, resplendent, dazzling, a riot of colour, nothing fitting with anything else, nothing quite fitting the body it was draped on. There'd been excited chatter in the camp about Turain's fashions and craft traditions for days now, everyone working out what they might want to get their hands on, putting in early orders with the soldiers, haggling over prices. Vultures. Though Tobias wouldn't mind a new coat, if one happened to turn up.

Anyway. He bagged everything up, shouldered it. The whole camp was stirring, busying itself for the march.

'Finally getting off, then,' Naillil said cheerfully. A woman he knew, made her money doing the soldiers' washing and sewing. She'd been with the army since Ith, way back. Longer than Tobias, in fact, technically. When Naillil started following the army, Tobias was still labouring under the impression he could do something else with his life.

Tobias nodded. 'Finally.' Had to say something more, really, somehow. Speak, Tobias! Don't mumble at her and walk off.

Rovi said in his horrible dead voice, 'Maybe King Marith's hangover was really crippling him?'

Tobias shuddered. All this time and you'd think he'd have got used to Rovi's voice and he never did and never would if he lived

a thousand years and heard it every day.

Naillil said, 'Rovi!' Pretending shock.

'Four days, we were all sitting around, after Lord Fiolt's birthday. Ander almost had to sack itself.' Dust puffing out of Rovi's rotting toothless scar-tissue mouth. Smell like when you dredged the bottom of a pond after a sheep fell in. Rovi had been a goatherd. Thirty years man and boy tending his flocks in the highlands of Illyr, until the Army of Amrath turned up. Rovi had got stabbed in the chest and the gut and the neck during the battle of Ethalden. Rovi had ended up face down in the river Jaxertane, sunk in the mud and the filth for three days. Only somehow Rovi ... hadn't died. Kind of. Naillil had found him when she went to wash some shirts out. 'Helpful for carrying my wash bags,' she'd said once, and Tobias really wasn't sure whether she meant something dirty by that or not. Really, really, really hoped not.

'Here we go,' said Rovi.

'Here we go.'

Trumpets rang. Strange gathering sound of an army beginning to march. Tramp of feet and clatter of horses' hooves. A rhythm to it, a music.

All day marching, through the mountains, beside the river that rushed down fast and wild and cold. The mountain slopes were covered with fruit trees, rich in birds and deer and wild goats. The sunlight came down through the leaves thick and golden, dappled the light, bathed their skin green. The men laughed and sang as they marched. A green tunnel, they were marching through,

like being a child forcing your way through hedgerows, unable to see the sky, parting the leaves like parting the water of the sea. Then the path would rise, the trees would thin out, the sky would explode huge above them, deep joyous blue. The mountain peaks would appear then, and even in the warm damp growing heat, on the highest peaks of the mountains, there was snow. Marching on soft green grass, green bushes crusted with purple flowers, sweating in the sunlight, dazzled by the light and the blue of the sky. Then the path would dip again, the trees would close in around them, green soft damp cool heat. Felt different. Sounded different. The air tasted different in the mouth.

The fruit on the trees was poisonous, the camp followers had been warned. If you ate it, you'd swell up and sweat and die. When they stopped that night the trees had great knotted roots and twisting branches reaching almost to the ground. Hiding the world around them. Huge waxy pink and red flowers that attracted more insects than you'd believe possible. There were birds in the trees eating the insects, they had brilliant red feathers with black undersides to their wings. Tamas birds. They shrieked and called, sounded like they were speaking.

A whole village of camp followers setting down for the night. Endless babble of women warning their children against eating the poison fruit, smell of food cooking, smell of sweaty bodies, smell of human excrement. The sun was just setting. Warm and red like a healing wound.

Naillil was cooking stew. Asked Tobias if he'd like to join her

and Rovi in having some.

‘Uh ... Yeah.’ Paused. He could sit downwind of Rovi. And the stew smelled good. ‘Thank you.’

‘Want to help me wring out some shirts, afterwards?’

‘Uh ... No.’ Paused. ‘Okay, then. Just this once.’

Tobias the bastard-hard sellsword! Hell yeah! Eased off his boots. Gods, his leg was bloody killing him this evening. Bad enough to make him forget about the pain in his arm and his ribs. When they’d eaten, Naillil called him over; he bent down over a pot of warm water, sank his hands in. Lifted the wet cloth up, water running back down into the wash-pot, the heavy feel of the wet cloth, solid and satisfying, the smell of the warm water in the warm air, the smell of the wet cloth. Twisted the shirt up to wring out the water, flicked it out with a good loud noise to get the creasing out. Water sprayed on his own clothes.

‘You’re good at this,’ Naillil said. She sounded surprised. Made a noncommittal secretly pleased nothing sound in his throat in answer, wrung out another shirt and enjoyed the feel of twisting the wet cloth. Naillil said, ‘Want to help me soap the next load, as well?’

Raeta the *gestmet*’s voice, weary: *Not much else you can do with your life, I’m guessing, except kill?* Tobias flicked the shirt out with a snap. Showered water over Naillil, who swore at him and laughed. Rovi sort of laughed.

From somewhere far off in the trees, a voice screamed.

Naillil looked up. Tobias looked up.

A howl in the air. A great gust of hot wind. More voices shouting. Screaming.

‘The dragon! The dragon!’ The sky lit up crimson. Fire blazing across the sky. ‘The dragon!’ a voice screamed. ‘The dragon!’

It came rushing over them, green and silver, huge as thinking, writhing and twisting and tearing at itself, swimming in the flames. Spewing out fire. Again. Again. Again. Again.

Soldiers came tramping towards them. Armed. Began killing them. Killing women. Killing children. The trail of lives that followed where the army led. Their women. Their children. Killing them.

Run.

Just run.

Tobias was gasping, wheezing, limping. His leg shrieking in pain and his arm shrieking and his heart and his ribs. Rovi next to him staggering, gasping, rot stink coming off him. Almost fell. Teeth gritted with pain. Up the slope of the mountain, towards ... something. Nothing. Just run. Good rich black earth clinging sucking to his boots. Streams of people. Soldiers. Panic. Naillil shouted, ‘Look.’ A dark little cleft in the rocks, a cave, could hardly see it in the night and it looked like a wound in the hillside and it stank of blood like everything everywhere they had been. They scrambled up to it, crouched into it, sat in the dark, like sitting inside a wound. Stone walls close around them. Tobias gasping and sobbing in pain. Trying to gasp loud enough to drown out Rovi wheezing his horrible broken dead bad-water breath.

‘It will be over soon,’ said Naillil. ‘Few hours, at most.’

‘Yeah. Few hours. Like last time.’

‘She’ll stop it. Or Lord Fiolt will.’

Noises in the night. Wing beats. Voices shouting. Then horsemen passing very near them, riding hard. Trumpet calls. Then silence.

They emerged from the cave in the first light of morning. Voices crying. Footsteps on loose pebbles, jangle of bronze. A soldier’s voice shouting commands.

‘Line up there! We’re marching now.’

The slope of the mountain fell away very steeply beneath them, they must have scrambled up it climbing, Tobias could barely remember except that it had hurt. In the valley beneath them, a column of soldiers was marching off south. Staring straight ahead, everything neat and tidy, armour polished, red crests to their helmets very bright. They marched past in silence. Another column, spearmen with long sarriss, a raw red banner at the head of their files. It hung limp in the still air. Further up the slope, very near them, a party of horsemen. The smell of the horses was strong and pleasant.

There were great burn marks across the mountain. The fruit trees were burned away, rocks smashed up. The earth bare and black and dead. Figures picked their way across a wasteland of black ash.

A woman was standing a short distance from them. A dead baby in her arms. Her face and body were streaked with blood.

Further down the slope a dead child lay sprawled, flies buzzing over it. A dead woman lay near it, her arms thrown out towards it. There were flies everywhere.

Oh Thalia, Tobias thought. Oh Thalia, girl.

‘She’s lost four pregnancies now,’ said Naillil. ‘Four pregnancies in four years.’ Naillil’s hands folded over her stomach. ‘You could almost pity her.’

She must have heard the sound Tobias was trying not to make. ‘I said almost,’ she said.

They began to walk slowly down the burned slope. Following the way the horsemen had gone. Tobias groaned in pain, rubbed at his arm. ‘Any chance any of our stuff survived, you reckon?’ One of the pointless things they said. Survivors coming together, the old hands who knew what to do to avoid the soldiers on the bad nights. Pedlars began to shout that they had cloths and blankets and cookpots for sale, cheap and best quality, lined up waiting for those who had lost everything overnight. The woman holding the dead baby began walking behind them. After perhaps an hour she grew calmer. Dropped the baby’s body. Walked on and walked on.

They stopped that night to make camp on the banks of a stream. Tobias made up the fire. Naillil began to prepare a pot of stew. Rovi sat and stank.

‘Why ... why did he ... do it?’ the woman whose baby had died asked them. Her name was Lenae. Couldn’t bring himself to ask about the baby’s name. Her hands moved and for a moment

Tobias almost saw a baby cradled in them.

Why? Oh gods. Don't ask that.

'You haven't been with the army long, then?' said Naillil at last.

Lenae flushed red as the fire. Pulled her cloak around her tight. 'I ... My husband was a merchant in Samarnath. When the *Ansikanderakesis Amrakane's* army came ... One of the soldiers was kinder to me. Stopped another from killing me. He – so I – everyone there was dead, and he – I – then he must have been killed, at Arunmen.' She looked away. 'Why did he do it? Kill the children? Burn the camp?'

A branch moved in the cookfire, sending up sparks. The fire died down to embers. 'Damn,' said Naillil. Tobias got up and poked at the fire and moved bits of wood around and eventually it flared up bright and hot.

'The queen lost her baby,' said Naillil. 'She was pregnant, and she lost the child ... And last night the king ... He ...'

'He was angry,' said Tobias. Say it. That fucking poison bastard Marith. That sick, vile, diseased, degenerate fucking bastard. My fault my fault my fault my fault. 'He ordered the ... the dragon ... ordered his soldiers to kill the children. All the children in the camp. He's done it before. Twice.'

'He'll feel remorse, soon enough,' said Naillil. 'He probably does already. Gets drunk, orders it, cries when he's told what he did. He'll probably give a bag of gold to anyone whose child died in it. To make amends.'

‘Like he did before,’ said Rovi. ‘Twice.’

‘So you’re quids in, then, woman,’ said Tobias. He stared into the fire. ‘You can go home to the smoking ruins of Samarnath and live rich as an empress in the ashes there.’

Thought then: I let Marith kill a baby, once.

Once?

A few years ago.

Let Marith do it?

Encouraged him. Swapped a baby’s life for a sleep in a bed.

You look like what you are, boy, he’d told Marith before the boy did it.

Three days later, Lenae had five thalers in a bag around her neck she didn’t know what to do with. Buy a house somewhere and live long and peaceful. Bury them in a hole and piss on them and curse Marith Altrersyr. Drink herself senseless and pay someone to slit her throat.

The first, almost certainly. That’s what most of the women had done. Twice before.

That’s not fair, Tobias thought. Not fair. She’s got every right to make the best of her crapped-on ruined wound of a life.

Chapter Eleven

Turain! The land fell away sharply, the plain of the Ither river opening up, black earth and rich fields before the desert and the mountains rose again. Groves of white oleander. Peach trees. Dates. Golden plump wheat. Ah, gods, the smell was mouthwatering. The wind blew up from the south scented with ripe fruit, everyone drooled as they breathed it in. The river lay a wide silver ribbon, fat, smooth and sleepy, worn out from rushing through the mountain slopes. It is good here, Tobias thought. Really bloody nice. Turain smiled at them on the horizon. Not a very big city. Maybe even just a large town. Not much to look at, either, said someone who knew someone who knew some bloke. Grey and square and low, houses with narrow windows, gloomy inside and out. It had been sacked and pillaged and burned and smashed up and basically completely annihilated a surprisingly large number of times. So it had very, very, very, very strong walls. Not like they weren't short on old stone.

'Is it really worth the amount of pain it's going to take to take it?' Snigger. 'Stupid question, yeah.'

The whole army sat and looked down on it. It sat and looked up at them back. The land around was completely empty. Abandoned villages, no people, not even a stray goat. Everyone and everything had fled inside the city. You got very, very, very, very strong walls, you're hardly likely to do much else, are you?

‘They’d have been better off staying outside it, I’d have thought, myself,’ Tobias said conversationally to Lenae. ‘Those walls are like an insult to him.’

‘Never seen a city the Army of Amrath can’t break to tiny bits!’ a passing soldier shouted, riding past them leading a squad all in silver helmets, all mounted on beautiful white horses with gold saddle cloths. ‘Gravel, we’ll make of those walls. Use them as a grindstone for their defenders’ bones.’

‘Cowards, cowering there behind their walls! We’ll teach them the cost of cowardliness!’

Oh my eye, didn’t Lenae look impressed.

Tobias made a face after them. ‘Yup. As I was just saying. Only in a less naff way.’

The siege train got itself ready for action. The army went down into the plains and brought back a feast of ripe, slightly ash-stained fruit. Wonder the people of Turain hadn’t burned the fields themselves, in all honesty. But maybe they had too much pride for it. Or too much misplaced hope. Marith ordered the dragons out to soften up the city a bit. Everyone sat on the mountain slopes munching peaches and drinking date wine, to watch. Dazzling. Impressive. The red dragon had a great turn of speed on it, turned in the air on a penny, had this neat trick of rushing over, spinning around, rushing back so quick its fires almost seemed to meet. The green dragon was slower: it came down low, tore at the buildings with its claws as well as burning them with its breath. The people of Turain did pretty well

against them, considering, loosed off various big missiles that did nothing, surprise surprise, but looked impressive and must have made everyone involved feel slightly better about things. Some mage bloke blasted light around: the spectators applauded politely when the green dragon shot up into the sky with one wing on fire, howling. Like watching a wrestling bout, you kind of wanted it to be a bit more of a matched fight. Support the underdog, like, for a while at the beginning. Not so interesting if the other side just caved from the off.

‘Date?’ Tobias asked Lenae. She shook her head, her mouth stuffed with peach. Juice running all sticky down her chin. Yeah. Nice to look at.

The mage bloke got the green dragon again, hurt it. Big groan rang over the mountainside. Gods, thought Tobias, gods, don’t tell me something’s actually going to go one up on him?

The green dragon and the red dragon met in the air. Quick conflag. Flew down over the city together. ‘Come on! Come on!’ the spectators all shouting. Underdog forgotten. Cheer of ‘Yesssss!’ as the mage sent up a blast of light that was abruptly snuffed out. Widespread applause. A curtain of fire came down over half the town.

The dragons seemed to decide that was game over. The place was indeed looking pretty well scorched and bashed up. They flew off overhead into the mountains, to oohs and aahs as they came low over. Nasty smell from the green one’s injured wing.

‘I’ll have a date, now, thanks,’ said Lenae. She got up. ‘That

was amazing. When do you think we'll go in?"

Weird, really, looking at the city, thinking this time tomorrow it was going to be rubble and human mince. The whole army lining up there, waving their sarriss around, marching back and forward pointlessly so King Marith can feel good about himself, knowing this time tomorrow they could be dead and there's absolutely nothing any of them can do to make it any different.

Tobias sauntered off to use the nearest latrine trench. Most of the camp followers didn't, filthy ignorant bastards, but. Pleasing, as always, that all the practical advice he'd given Marith about latrines had paid off. A lot of soldiers were squatting there with him, fresh from helping to chuck big rocks around and gasping with relief. All the fruit they'd been eating was, uh, having something of an effect.

'Lovely display,' said Tobias. Seemed apposite to say something, when you're shoulder to shoulder with a bloke hearing the sound of his shit come out.

'You what?'

Wait, no, not the— Oops, gods. Disgusting mind, you have, mate.

'He means the siege, obviously,' bloke on the other side of him said. And: thank you. Someone with a clean train of thought. Face burning, Tobias shuffled himself to sort of facing him.

'Clews, man!'

Pause. 'Uh, do I know you?'

Porridge boy. Yeah?

Oh, wait, no, he doesn't know me. Can't really say, 'No, you don't, but I wept over you, just recently, cause you reminded me of the life I fucked up.'

'He's a camp follower,' the man who'd thought he was talking about the men lined up shitting said. 'They know all our names, the camp followers do. Idolize us.' Big, strong, solid-looking man, flashy hair, expensive cavalryman's boots ... some of the camp followers probably did know his name, yeah. He probably paid them extra if they screamed it.

'Pathetic, they are, camp followers,' Clews said. Sneer in his voice. Trying to make his voice sound loud and strong. 'Men camp followers! Cowardly. Should be soldiering.'

Don't rise to it, ignore it, you know what he's doing, he's a boy, it's only bugging you because ... 'I was a soldier,' Tobias said. 'I spent years soldiering, I'll have you know.' Killed more men than you've had hot meals – for the love of all the gods, don't say that, don't. The cavalryman was grinning at them both, still crouching over the latrine trench. He's got you right riled up, Tobias, this kid, and you know why, and just finish your crap and walk away.

'Got scared, did you?' Clews said.

Tobias stood up, knees creaking. 'Got old and aching.' Started to walk off.

'That's no excuse. My squad commander's probably older than you.'

Stopped. Oh, gods, this boy. 'Your squad commander got a knackered leg and a knackered arm and a broken rib that never

properly healed?’ Your squad commander fought a demon and a mage and a bloody fucking death god?

Clews snorted. ‘Got men in my squad injured worse than that, still fighting on. A man in my squad with one arm. A man in my squad with half his face burned off. A—’

‘Yes, all right, okay, great, well done them.’ Gods, if I had a sword right now, a knife, a bit of sharpened stick ...

‘When Turain falls, tomorrow,’ Clews said, ‘I’ll bring enough loot home to my family that they can get my sister married. If we get through the gates early, get the pick of the houses, I can bring home enough so my dad can stop having to work. And they paid a silver penny a head, they say, at Tereen. Couple of good strikes, that’d be enough we could buy the next field, hire a man to work it ... And look at you, pleading your knackered leg.’

The cavalryman with the hair was sniggering now. He and Tobias exchanged looks. Rolled their eyes at each other. Well, yes ... There’s that, yes, true enough. Gods, poor dumb kid.

‘It’s fucking awful, the actual fighting,’ Clews said. ‘But worth it.’ Sneer came back, faking it so hard it hurt you to watch. ‘If you’re brave enough. A silver penny a head, they said.’ He gestured vaguely towards the camp. ‘As we’re talking ... you want to go for a drink?’

Suppose the kid could just be desperate to fuck someone on possibly his last night of living. Let’s try to be charitable here. Part of him wanted to take the kid off and listen, even, lend him a handkerchief, tell him it would be all right in the end.

Tobias said, 'I've got things to do. Cowardly old-man camp-follower things.'

Decided to turn in early. Curled up in the tent. Went to sleep thinking of dragons dancing, peach juice dripping down Lenae's chin.

You miss it, Tobias, man, he thought as he drifted up off to sleep. Bronze and blood and fire and killing. You lie to yourself, but you always will. You, washing clothes? Yeah, right.

Warm water smell, heavy feel of wet cloth, washing the fucking blood out.

Symbolic, yeah, don't you think?

Chapter Twelve

Landra Relast, Marith's enemy, sworn to defeat him and destroy him

Ethalden the Tower of Life and Death, the first Amrath's capital, the City of the *Ansikanderakesis Amrakane*, the King of Ruin, the King of Death

When Landra had last been here, Ethalden had been a city of workmen, of raw stone slabs and stacked timbers, building rubble, scaffolding, workers' huts, soldiers' tents. The air had smelled of sawdust and stonedust, great clouds of it stirred up; the air had resounded with the shouts and songs of labourers and craftsmen. Marith's fortress had risen up in the midst of this chaos, a glory of gold and mage glass and marble, heavy silk and shining fur and bright gems. Throne rooms, banqueting halls, pleasure gardens, crystal fountains pouring out perfumed water coloured red or blue or deep lush forest green. A central tower like a beam of sunlight was set at its very centre, so high it seemed to come down from the heavens to the earth. It was made of silver and pearl, hung with red banners; on balconies at its heights bells and silver trumpets rang out. Beside it stood two temples, one of gold dedicated to Queen Thalia, one of iron dedicated to Marith himself. In its shadow stood a tomb of onyx, holding the bones of the first Amrath.

Every master builder in Irlast had been summoned to

Ethalden. Men who could work stone to create marvels, for whom stone could flow like water, who could pour out beauty onto the bare earth. Men with hands running with magic, with power over stone and metal to raise them up into dreams. Thirty days, Marith Altrersyr *Ansikanderakesis Amrakane* had given them to build him a fortress. If it was not completed as the sun rose on the thirty-first day, he would kill them. On the morning of the thirty-first day, the feast of Sunreturn, Landra had watched Marith ride into his fortress to be crowned King of Illyr and of all Irlast.

And now around the fortress a city was forming. Palaces for Marith's lords. Storehouses for the wealth of his empire. Barracks for his armies. Docks from which ships sailed across the world. He had emptied the towns and villages of Illyr, resettled the people here. The streets were wide and well-made, the houses tall.

Landra had once been betrothed to Marith Altrersyr. Her father had been Lord of Third Isle, one of the greatest lords of the White Isles, a companion of King Illyn Marith's father. Her brother Carin had been Marith's lover, until Marith killed him. It was in her father's house of Malth Salene, the Tower of the Shining Sea, that Marith was first crowned king. Marith had killed his own father before Malth Salene's walls. After he had killed Landra's father and her mother and her sister, and thought that he had killed Landra herself.

In the ruins of Ethalden, as the great battle for the ruins of

Amrath's city had still raged, Landra had uncovered the bones of the first Amrath, used a power they held clenched within them to try to destroy Marith. Failed. In the new city rising on the rubble of the battlefield she had seen Marith crowned in his new palace he had built himself on the site of her failure. Her brother would have wept for him, she had thought. She had tried herself to weep for him.

Don't go looking for vengeance: but, oh, it is too late for that. No other arguments left. Anything else is weak. She thought now: I did not want to come back here. I do not want to do this. But I must. I must. It hurt to her soul, guilt and anger mixed together. Shame, dry and crouched, flaked with dried blood. And the joy, on top of it. Perfume to her soul. Landra Relast, who had nothing left. Do it! Do it! You must! She had crossed half the world, to return here, to do this. She was not certain whom she thought of, when she thought of vengeance. Against Marith, or against herself. When she had found him he was dead, nothing, forgotten, a sellsword in a rough company of failed killers. He was content enough with his life, he had claimed. All he had ever wanted: to be nothing. She had brought him back to his kingdom to punish him. Ah, gods, Amrath and Eltheia, she had punished him. The great tragedy of all our lives, she thought: that I walked the wrong way down a street in a distant city, and thought I saw his face, and followed him. If I had been looking the other way, when he passed me ... If I had walked left rather than right out of a shop ... Through such absurdities the world is brought to this.

A soldier spares a child in the sack of a city: the child grows up to be a man who beats his wife. A cruel master dies, his heir frees his servants: they starve and freeze on the road, homeless, lost. A woman chooses one dress over another: a dressmaker's child eats or does not eat that night. Deep inside her, a voice laughed and stirred. Rustle of green leaves. Giggle of running water. Scream of grief. It is not vengeance, she thought. It is just and good. He is Ruin. The world will be a better place without him.

What would I have done, Lan thought, if he had asked me to forgive what he did to me?

She spat in the dust, mounted up on her horse, rode slowly down the hill towards the city that shone before her.

Reached the city's gates in the late afternoon. All of white marble, and the city walls themselves were solid gold. As though he had thought of the bronze walls of Sorlost and promised himself that he would outdo them. Measuring himself by this. And the green and gold walls of Malth Salene, she thought. Somewhere here was a boy clasping Carin's hand with a smile.

Guards at the gate in bronze armour and red badges, the Altrersyr colour, red banners above the gates snapping in the cold wind. Bored-looking, guarding a city at the end of the world: they must dream of being in his wars. She could feel the spear points whispering to them. A wagon came out through the gates with its cargo safely muffled against the weather. It was so cold that the oxen drawing it steamed out breath like dragons; Landra could smell the sweet hay scent of them, a good smell.

‘What is your business?’ the guard on the gate asked her, when it was her turn to enter.

‘I am seeking work,’ she lied in a flat voice. He looked at her, and she saw what he must see, her head swathed in cloth covering what should be her hair, her scars, the dry cold of her eyes, the stiffness in her body of knotted wounds. Still a young woman, somewhere beneath it all, but her face was the face of a thing carved from rock. ‘It’s not as bad as you think,’ she used to hope for Tobias to tell her, when he caught her looking at her reflection, ‘people always look worse to themselves, yeah?’ It can’t be as bad as you think.

The guard shrugged. ‘Come in, then. Ethalden the City of the King welcomes you.’ A rich man with a guard around him rode in after her and was not questioned. She still noticed that she noticed that. She found an inn, argued with the innkeep over the cost of stabling, argued with the innkeep again until he moved her to a room with a door she could lock. The whole inn smelled of sawdust. Joists still creaking and settling, plaster in places still damp. The stairs to her room were badly made, the steps uneven; the bedroom door struck in the frame. But she had never been in a place so new and clean. They could only have finished building it in the last week.

She ached. Her whole body, aching. Deep pain, down to the bones, in her back, her stomach, in her chest when she drew a breath. In her hands, up her arms, pulling and twisting up her right arm, the fingers on her right hand puffed up red and numb.

She spat on her fingers, rubbed the spit into them, took a water bottle from her belt and poured water over them to try to ease the pain.

Chilblains, she told people. Winter is a cruel goddess, gnawing at the flesh. The skin looked heavy, mottled like old meat. She had seen people wince, rub their own hands, when they saw it. She opened and closed her fingers. Shook her hand out. The pain faded a little. It would not heal while Marith lived.

She went over to the window, which faced north over the city out towards the Bitter Sea. The end of everything. An hour's walk, and then sheer cliffs, and then the sea going on into eternity. No ship would sail on those waters. Wave upon wave upon wave of dark water, on until the world's end. It was pleasant looking out in that direction, thinking of the sea beyond the walls. Far beyond human hopes or cares. Ignorant of all human things. No hope no pain. Calming. The desire to be herself beyond human things.

The wind was getting up, shaking the branches of a tree opposite the window A birch tree, its bark white as bone. Its branches rattled like bone. *'His city is built on bones and blood and tears, His city is built on the flesh of living men,'* the songs of praise to King Marith said. *'Is it true?'* one of soldiers had once asked her, a new recruit, young and ardent and eager, all his love for Marith glittering out of him, *'is it true, that he ordered his fortress to be built on living bodies, that he mixed the mortar with human blood?'* The Army of Amrath had just taken Raen,

had built their towers of skulls where the walls had stood. And the soldier's eyes had gleamed, looking past the skulls, seeing greater, more terrible things. *'Is it true? Really? They say you were there, Lan, they say you've been with the army since Illyr. Tell me it's true, won't you?'*

She had tried to speak, but no words had come from her mouth.

'It is,' Tobias had said. *'I saw it. I saw.'* And then he'd rolled his eyes. *'And other places aren't, of course. Alborn, Morr Town, Sorlost the Golden, Malth Salene ... no one suffered and strained and got hurt building them. Light as air, the stones that built Malth Salene, and the labourers were paid in gold.'*

'That's not the same, Tobias,' Lan had said.

'No. It's not. Obviously it's not. But ...' Tobias had shaken his head. *'Never mind, then. I'm being cruel.'*

Raen had been chaos, the usual maelstrom after a sack. Landra had taken her knife in her injured right hand, buried the blade up to the hilt in the soldier's heart.

Filth. Her heart had sung out for joy. One less of them. A tiny bright difference: somewhere in the heart of a loving world a joyous song is rising. Her shame had been a void beneath her feet.

'You know what I mean,' Tobias had said. *'Don't you?'*

'Perhaps.'

'Better get your knife clean, Lady Landra,' Tobias had said. *'And get away from that corpse.'*

She had left Tobias the next morning, fled away north towards the cities of Ander and Balkash. Warn them. Beg them. I can no longer bear it, she had told herself, I must act, make it stop. Something can be done and must be done. She had once loosed a *gabeleth*, a vengeance-demon; she had once fought beside a *gestmet*, a god of life. Thus she could do things. A bright light in the world, was Lady Landra Relast. A joyous song, a good sweet song to make the world a better place. Thus every night she cursed him. I will not rest, she swore to herself, until he is defeated and all who follow him are dead.

Knife in her heart. Shame and pity. Her hands ached sore heavy wound red. The wind blew in the branches of the tree opposite, and the branches scratched together like bones, and the bark was white like bones in the fading light.

But in the dawn, ah, Ethalden was beautiful. Grey mist around the towers, fading, they were unreal, they were not buildings but statues, stone dancers, robed in clouds, they were giants dancing, they wore the dawn as jewels on their skin. Landra slept well and peacefully. Her ancestor Amrath's city: so perhaps He blessed her, eased her pain, let her sleep. Perhaps her hair and her skin were healed a little. Her wounds less harsh. There were a thousand birds in the city of Ethalden, and every one of them seemed to gather beneath her window that morning to sing. She rested her hands on the windowsill and gazed out at the city, over towards the gold walls and away into the horizon where the sea would be. Peace. Peace. The streets already busy with

people, animals, voices chattering, the sound of building work. Women in fine dresses, workmen already covered with stone dust clinging damp to their clothes, slave labourers from half the world chained in filth. Trades being made, goods bought and sold, gold and treasure and living men. The patterns and circles of every city: those who dance begin to dance, and those who weep begin. Beggars, naturally, as in every city – but fewer than in other cities, she thought, where the wealth of the world did not now come. Even as she watched, a woman gave a beggar a coin, smiled at him. Children playing – she watched a pair of them, a boy and a girl, from their matching curls they must be brother and sister. The girl ran and the boy chased her, the boy caught her and pulled at the girl's dress; they began to quarrel, the girl pulling her brother's hair; a woman ran up to scold them, kiss the boy's curls, take their hands firmly and walk on. Pilgrims were making for the tomb of Amrath. Strong young men and women were looking to join the Army of Amrath. Some kind of absurdity here that she, Landra, was a descendant of Amrath.

'Your great-great-great etc grandma got knocked up by your great-great-great etc grandpa. Get you! Astonishing achievement, having ancestors, isn't it? Very rare thing.'

'That's not fair, Tobias.'

'Oh, no, I'm sorry, his great-great-great-grandpa having knocked up his great-great-great-grandma certainly means he's entitled to all this.' That had been on the day of Marith's coronation. Tobias had spread his arms wide, taken in all the

towers of the fortress, the cheering crowds, the banners and petals and jewels, taken all of it into his outstretched embrace. *'His birthright. His destiny. For being able to reel off a list of his ancestors' names.'* As Tobias said it, the sun had put out golden beams that had struck Marith's face perfectly, lit up his face and his eyes and his crown, made him shine.

'Honey cakes! Saffron! Curd cakes! Dried plums!' Landra shook her head. A foodseller positioned himself opposite her window with a tray of cakes, his own face thin and hungry. The children came running back with their mother to buy some. Workers were swarming up a great tower of ivory beside the north gates shouting to each other in a babble of languages, up ropes and ladders, calling, whistling.

'Get on! Get on! Get it built!'

A great spike of carved sweetwood was rising there: Landra watched the workers struggle with it, drag it awkwardly up the building. Ropes flailing. Many curses. It almost slipped, three men almost fell. It was carved to look like a garland of flowers, gilded in silver leaf, skeletal faces staring empty-eyed between the blooms. They got it upright, finally, struggled and fought with it. Almost done it ... then a scream, as a man did fall. His arms flailing as he came down. Horrified cries from his fellows. Landra could not see him hit the earth but turned her face away anyway. Such a long sickened pause. All the men looking downwards, each must be thanking all gods and demons that it had not been him. The foreman shouted at them to get

back to it. The carved wood shuddered; they got it steady again, slotted it finally into place. The thud of a mallet on wood. Landra breathed a great sigh of relief. The tower looked beautiful, with the wooden spike at its height. The morning light caught the gilding; from her window, Landra could see the flowers and the faces clearly, like one of Marith's skull towers, blossom growing up over dead faces all those dead eyes. At the base of the spire, workers scrambled with blocks of marble to build a parapet. I wonder whose palace that will be? she thought. And if they will live to see it? Osen Fiolt? Valim Erith? Alis Nymen, who had once sold fish to the kitchens of Malth Salene? The new lords, his new friends, from all over Irlast. He betrayed Carin's memory, surely, by making these fine new friends from every corner of Irlast.

A block of stone was being hauled up now, carved with a pattern of hunting beasts. There seemed to be an argument going on over it, the foreman waved his arms, seemed angry, the workers lifting it shrugged and gestured back. The block was lowered down again. The foreman climbed down a ladder, began to argue with someone else, pointed at the block. The two of them disappeared from Landra's sight, still arguing. The thin-faced cake seller, she noticed, was now eating one of his own cakes. He looked delighted by it. Two men came hurrying up with a bier, to cart off the remains of the workman.

Anyway. Things to be done. She adjusted the headscarf covering her burns. Went down out into the city.

She went first to the tomb of Amrath. Already crowds were gathered there to leave offerings. Just to see it. Amrath's bones. The tarnished shards of Amrath's sword and helmet and armour, twisted and boiled with dragon fire, eaten into lace by dragon blood. Marith had killed his brother Tiothlyn; the first Amrath had killed His brother that was a dragon, been killed by it as He died. Ever were the Altrersyr fratricides and parricides and cursed men.

The bones of an arm. The bones of a hand. A shattered ribcage. A shattered skull case. Blind eye holes, a hole where the nose had been, white pearly teeth but missing its lower jaw. Yellow old dry bare cold bone. A man who died and lay dead and unburied. A man who had no one left at the end to mourn for him. Marith had gathered up the bones in his own arms, laid them with reverence on a bier of white samite in a coffin of cedar wood in a coffin of iron in a coffin of gold. Over them a temple of black onyx had been raised, sat glaring in the shadow of Marith's fortress. The doorway was high and narrow, like the doorway of the Great Temple in Sorlost. The whole tomb building, Landra thought with pity, was modelled on the Great Temple in Sorlost. Inside, the floor was black iron, the walls smooth stone. The gold coffin stood on a plinth of white marble. It was huge, to look as though the bones inside it had been huge as a giant. Braziers burned all around it, sending out smoke that was rancid with incense. The smoke made the air dry.

A woman leaned forward to kiss the coffin. A man placed

a knife in offering at the base of the plinth. ‘Amrath,’ voices murmured. ‘Amrath. Amrath.’

Landra’s hands itched. The skin red and dry, her fingers puffed up, swollen, the skin cracked. She followed the woman worshipper, reached out and placed her hands on the gold. They ached. The metal felt very cold. She could feel herself shaking. Hear her fast shallow breath.

What do I expect to happen? she thought.

The air in the room whispered. Something will happen. Waiting. Her face reflected in the gold. Wait a little longer, and you’ll see, something will come, the face there will change, the dead will rise. Stare and her reflection is changing, no longer can she recognize that face.

Pity. My ancestor, Amrath, cruel hateful man of anger: unmourned, unburied, raw bones. You, also, would not have chosen this. Did not want this. The face there, so close, thinking it, feeling it: you trampled the world beneath you, who would ever wish this for their life? Everyone in the world, and no one. Amrath, my ancestor, you had what all hearts desire, all it ever can be is grief. To be touched by the gods is cruelty and suffering. To be as a god is to be nothing but death.

My ancestor, Amrath, help me. Grant me strength.

The face in the gold, a different face not her face. Eyes open, mouth open wide, it will speak, it will speak, tell me, help me ... Pressed her hands onto the gold. Closer. Closer. Amrath, my ancestor, Your bones lie here, show me what to do, help me. A

ringing in her body, a pulse there tolling. The heaviness of it. Trying to reach the surface, swimming, and the surface of the water hanging out of reach. The cool of swimming with open eyes, seeing another world.

There, a face, a mouth opening in the gold, sinking up through the gold towards her. Help me.

A man beside her jostled her, bending awkwardly forward to press his own forehead to the coffin.

Broken. Landra backed away. Dead old bones.

The man who had jostled her was garlanded in flowers, he took them off and threw them in offering. 'A son, Amrath, World Conqueror, Lord of Irlast, grant me a son.' His voice was sad and cracked.

Voices, echoing around the black walls, babbling.

'My wife is sick,' another man said, 'let her be healed.'

'Let him marry me. Let him love me again.'

'Heal the pain in my leg, the wound there, Amrath, World Conqueror, I was wounded fighting for our king, heal me.' Smell of flesh rotting. Swirl of incense smoke.

A woman stood silent, staring at the coffin, her face rigid. A man beside her stared not at the coffin but at the people praying there. A man beside him wept.

Mourning?

Rejoicing?

The woman cut off a lock of her hair, laid it before the tomb. 'Amrath, Amrath, World Conqueror, keep the king safe. That is

all I pray. All that any of us pray.’

A note of sorrow then, Landra thought, in the air, in the gold of the tomb.

The red pain in her hand felt no different, if she had hoped that coming here would help it. Touching the bones had caused it, could not now cure it. Dead old yellow bones without power for anything. ‘Tear it down,’ she whispered. And a pain stirring inside her. Itching like lice across her heart. Grief. Pain. Rage. Hope.

Such ordinary things, they wanted, these people, that they must be punished for.

Outside the tomb the city was churning with people. Thalia’s temple was empty, almost ignored; the doorway of Marith’s temple was crowded with soldiers making dedications and prayers.

‘A strong right arm, my Lord Marith *Ansikanderakesis Amrakane*.’

‘A strong right arm and my sword coated in blood.’

In the temple forecourt, a horse’s head had been raised up on a pole of bleached white wood. It grinned through skeletal jaws. Sinews drying curling back its lips. Its eyes were almost still alive. Its mane moved in the wind. Landra found herself staring at this, also. Disgusting thing. A sacrifice. To Amrath. To Marith. Imagine it, making a sacrifice to yourself.

‘The luck horse,’ a woman said, seeing her staring.

Landra nodded. ‘Yes. I know.’

‘The king killed it,’ the woman said, ‘on the day he rode out to rebuild Amrath’s empire. Jet black, it was, with a blaze of white on its forehead like a star. The most beautiful horse I’ve ever seen.’

The woman was dressed in tatters, her hair matted and filthy. She had a strip of rotting horsehide wrapped around her right arm. A bone that might have been a part of a horse’s backbone hanging on a chain around her neck.

‘You saw it?’ Landra asked her.

‘I held the horse’s bridle,’ the woman said, ‘while he killed it.’ Landra thought: she’s mad.

‘It was a wild horse,’ the woman said. ‘Running loose on the shore out to the north, where the land is dead. Left over from the army that fought him here, the traitors, the blind ones who did not follow him. His enemy’s horse, that fled when the battle was lost, its rider dead. On the day the army was to march my husband found it, out on the shore there where the traitors’ bones lie. He brought it to the king and the king sacrificed it for luck. To bless his army as they marched. Four years ago. Now I sit here beside his temple. To guard it.’

A horror of something gripped Landra. She said, ‘And your husband?’ But before she had finished speaking, she guessed.

‘The horse killed him,’ the woman said. ‘When the king drew his sword it reared up, its hooves shattered my husband’s skull. He lay there dying while the sacrifice was made: his blood and his life, as well as the horse’s, they marched through, to bless the

army and the king. Now I sit here. Guarding it.' She looked at Landra keenly. 'They say that if you give me a coin, any prayer you made in the king's temple will be more likely to come true.'

'I haven't been into the king's temple,' Landra said. She reached into her pocket to hand over a coin. The horse woman raised her hand to thank her. Stepped back. Grimy eyes blinked at Landra.

'Any prayer,' the horse woman said. 'Any prayer, and it will be granted. Think on that.'

'What happened to the horse's body?' Landra asked. Why she asked that she had no idea.

'They sold it for meat,' the horse woman said.

Landra went back to the inn, ate a meal, paid the innkeep's boy a handful of copper to saddle her horse. Rode out of the north gate of the city, along the banks of the Haliakmon river, towards the shore of the Bitter Sea. Silt-blackened water, rushing down fast from the hills, singing as it ran. Fields on the riverbanks, stubbled with winter wheat. Apple trees, plum trees, ghost leaves and ghost fruit still clinging to their branches. Yellow broom flowers, wild clematis down like wool in the hedges. Beside the river the land became marshy, irises on the riverbanks, bulrushes, willows, alder, the banks of the river smelled of rotting leaves and of mint. Water fowl in great numbers. Herons, still and grey as godstones, long long legs, their wings raised over their heads. Kingfishers, perfect blue. An arrow flight of white geese. Red cattle in the meadows, shaggy and long-horned, raising their

heads from the grass watching with dark liquid eyes; sheep on the hills beyond with thick wool for war cloaks. A herd of deer come down to a sheltered pool in the marsh to drink.

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