

FORGE OF DARKNESS

STEVEN ERIKSON



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Steven Erikson



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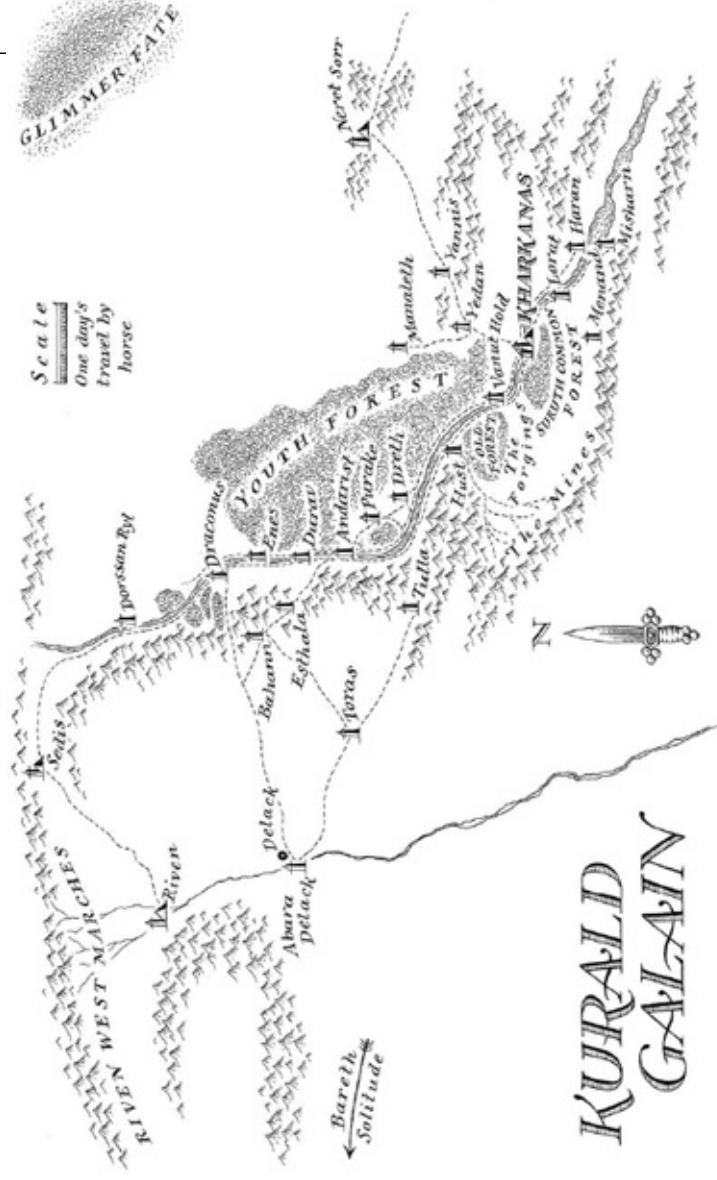
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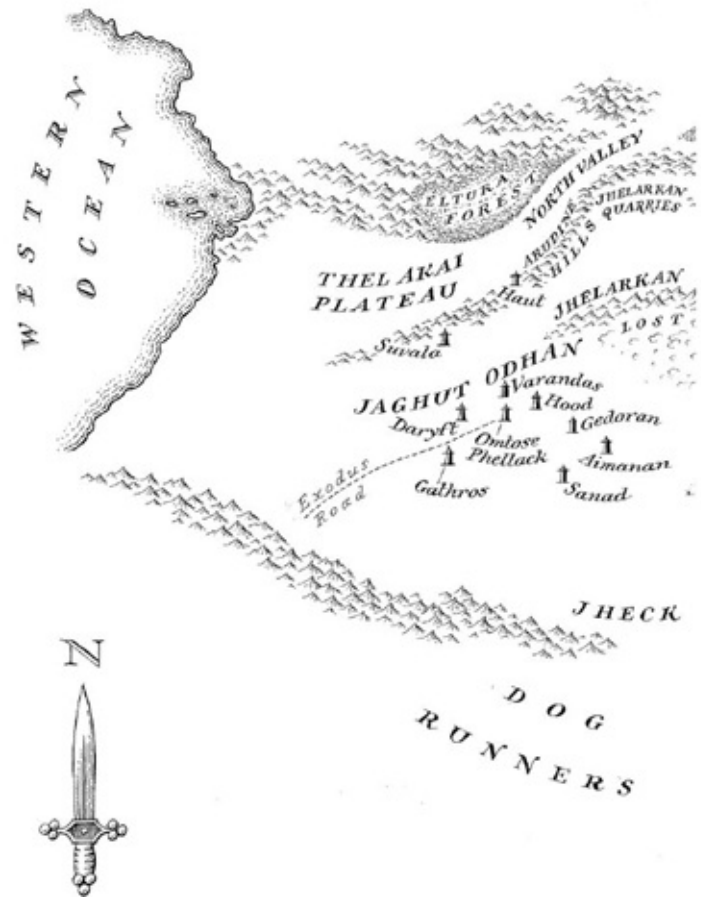
GILMER TATE

Scale
One day's
travel by
horse



KURALD GALAIN

THELAKAI, JAGHUT, TISTE REALMS



DRAMATIS PERSONAE

PURAKE HOLD

Anomander
Andarist
Silchas Ruin
Kellaras
Prazek
Dathenar

DRACONS HOLD

Draconus
Ivis
Spite
Envy
Malice
Arathan
Raskan
Sagander

TULLA HOLD

Hish Tulla
Rancept
Sukul Ankhadu (hostage)

HOUSE ENES

Jaen Enes
Enesdia
Kadaspala
Cryl Durav (hostage)

HOUSE DURAV

Spinnock Durav
Faror Hend

HUST HOLD (and Legion)

Hust Henarald
Calat Hustain
Finarra Stone
Toras Redone
Galar Baras

ABARA DELACK

Korya Delath

Nerys Drukorlat
Sandalath Drukorlat
Orfantal
Wreneck

NERET SORR
Vatha Urusander
Osserc
Hunn Raal
Risp
Sevegg
Serap
Renarr
Gurren

URUSANDER'S LEGION OFFICERS
Scara Bandaris
Ilgast Rend
Hallyd Bahann
Esthala
Kagamandra Tulas
Sharenas Ankhadu
Tathe Lorat
Infayen Menand

THE BORDERSWORDS
Rint
Ville
Feren
Galak
Lahanis
Traj

THE CITADEL
Syntara
Emral Lanear
Endest Silann
Cedorpul
Rise Herat
Legyl Behust
Mother Dark

THE SHAKE
Sheccanto Derran
Warlock Resh
Caplo Dreem
Skelenal

Witch Ruvera

THE AZATHANAI

Grizzin Farl

Kilmandaros

Sechul Lath

Errastas

Caladan Brood

T'riss

Old Man

THE JAGHUT

Hood

Gothos

Haut

Varandas

Korya Delath (hostage)

OTHERS

Gripp Galas

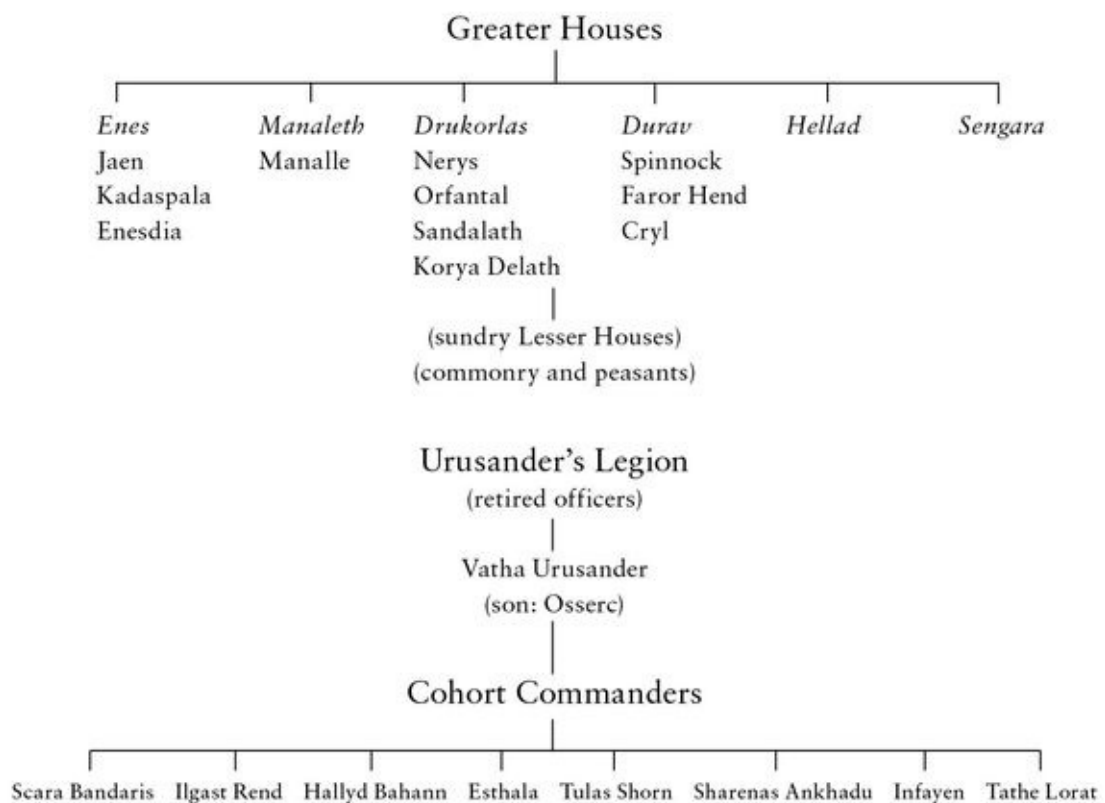
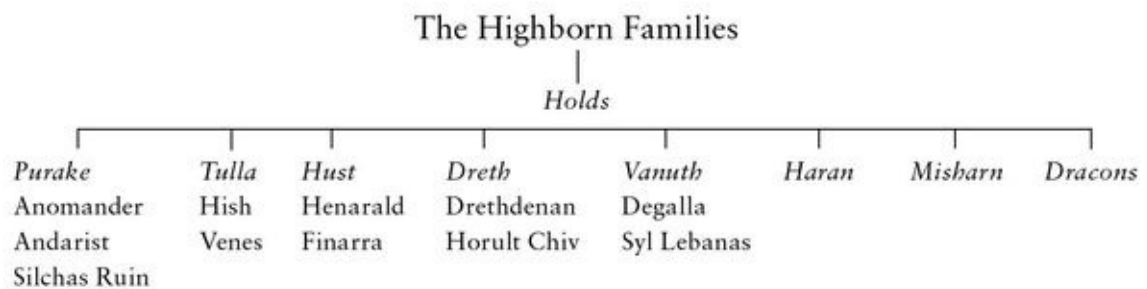
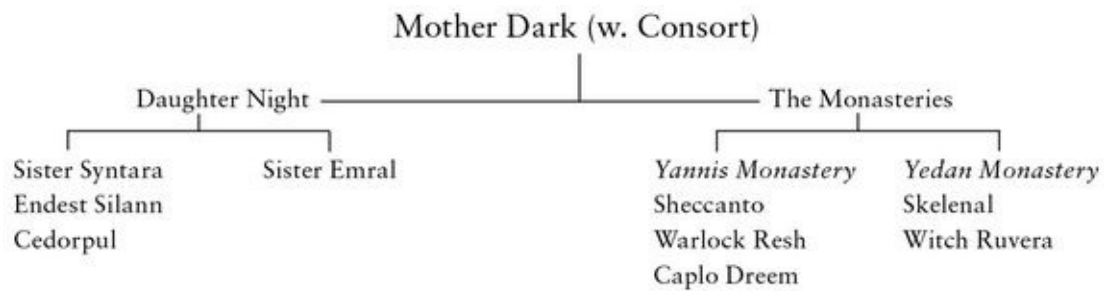
Haral

Narad

Bursa

Olar Ethil

The Tiste: Holds, Greater and Lesser Houses, Priesthood and Court



PRELUDE

... so you have found me and would know the tale. When a poet speaks of truth to another poet, what hope has truth? Let me ask this, then. Does one find memory in invention? Or will you find invention in memory? Which bows in servitude before the other? Will the measure of greatness be weighed solely in the details? Perhaps so, if details make up the full weft of the world, if themes are nothing more than the composite of lists perfectly ordered and unerringly rendered; and if I should kneel before invention, as if it were memory made perfect.

Do I look like a man who would kneel?

There are no singular tales. Nothing that stands alone is worth looking at. You and me, we know this. We could fill a thousand scrolls recounting the lives of those who believe they are each both beginning and end, those who fit the totality of the universe into small wooden boxes which they then tuck under one arm – you have seen them marching past, I'm sure. They have somewhere to go, and wherever that place is, why, it needs them, and failing their dramatic arrival it would surely cease to exist.

Is my laughter cynical? Derisive? Do I sigh and remind myself yet again that truths are like seeds hidden in the ground, and should you tend to them who may say what wild life will spring into view? Prediction is folly, belligerent assertion pathetic. But all such arguments are past us now. If we ever spat them out it was long ago, in another age, when we both were younger than we thought we were.

This tale shall be like Tiam herself, a creature of many heads. It is in my nature to wear masks, and to speak in a multitude of voices through lips not my own. Even when I had sight, to see through a single pair of eyes was a kind of torture, for I knew – I could feel in my soul – that we with our singular visions miss most of the world. We cannot help it. It is our barrier to understanding. Perhaps it is only the poets who truly resent this way of being. No matter; what I do not recall I shall invent.

There are no singular tales. A life in solitude is a life rushing to death. But a blind man will never rush; he but feels his way, as befits an uncertain world. See me, then, as a metaphor made real.

I am the poet Gallan, and my words will live for ever. This is not a boast. It is a curse. My legacy is a carcass in waiting, and it will be picked over until dust devours all there is. And when my last breath is long gone, see how the flesh still moves, see how it flinches.

When I began, I did not imagine finding my final moments here upon an altar, beneath a hovering knife. I did not believe my life was a sacrifice; not to any greater cause, nor as payment into the hands of fame and respect. I did not think any sacrifice was necessary at all.

No one lets dead poets lie in peace. We are like old meat on a crowded dinner table. Now comes the next course to jostle what's left of us, and even the gods despair of ever cleaning up the mess. But there are truths between poets, and we both know well their worth. It is the gristle we chew without end.

Anomandaris. That is a brave title. But consider this: I was not always blind. It is not Anomander's tale alone. My story will not fit into a small box. Indeed, he is perhaps the least of it. A man pushed from behind by many hands will go in but one direction, no matter what he wills.

It may be that I do not credit him enough. I have my reasons.

You ask: where is my place in this? It is nowhere. Come to Kharkanas, here in my memory, in my creation. Walk the Hall of Portraits and you will not find my face. Is this what it is to be lost, in the very world that made you, that holds your flesh? Do you in your world share my plight? Do you wander and wonder? Do you start at your own shadow, or awaken to rattling disbelief that this is a

you are, prospects bleak, bereft of the proof of your ambition?

~~*Or do you march past sure of your frown and indeed that is a fine box you carry ...*~~

Am I the world's only lost soul?

Do not begrudge my smile at that. I too cannot be made to fit into that small box, though many would try. No, best discard me entire, if peace of mind is desired.

The table is crowded, the feast unending. Join me upon it, amidst the wretched scatter and heap. The audience is hungry and its hunger is endless. And for that, we are thankful. And if I spoke of sacrifices, I lied.

Remember well this tale I tell, Fisher kel Tath. Should you err, the list-makers will eat you alive.

PART ONE

In these gifts the shapes of adoration

ONE

THERE WILL BE PEACE.

The words were carved deep across the lintel stone's facing in the ancient language of the Azathanai. The cuts looked raw, untouched by wind or rain, and because of this, they might have seemed as youthful and as innocent as the sentiment itself. A witness lacking literacy would see only the violence of the mason's hand, but surely it is fair to say that the ignorant are not capable of irony. Yet like the house-hound who by scent alone will know a guest's true nature, the uncomprehending witness surrenders nothing when it comes to subtle truths. Accordingly, the savage wounding of the lintel stone's basalt face remained imposing and significant to the unversed, even as the freshness of the carved words gave pause to those who understood them.

There will be peace. Conviction is a fist of stone at the heart of all things. Its form is shaped by sundered hands, the detritus quickly swept from view. It is built to withstand, built to defy challenge, and when cornered it fights without honour. There is nothing more terrible than conviction.

It was generally held that no one of Azathanai blood could be found within Dracons Hold. Indeed, few of those weary-eyed creatures from beyond Bareth Solitude ever visited the city-state of Kura Galain, except as stone-cutters and builders of edifices, summoned to some task or venture. But the Hold's lord was not a man to welcome questions in matters of personal inclination. If by an Azathanai hand ambivalent words were carved above the threshold to the Hold's Great House – as if to announce a new age with either a promise or a threat – that was solely the business of Lord Draconus, Consort of Mother Dark.

In any case, it was not often of late that the Hold was home to its lord, now that he stood at her side in the Citadel of Kharkanas, making his sudden return after a night's hard ride both disquieting and the source of whispered rumours.

The thunder of horse hoofs approached through the faint light of the sun's rise – a light ever muted by the Hold's nearness to the heart of Mother Dark's power – and that sound grew until it rumbled through the arched gateway and pounded into the courtyard, scattering red clay from the road beyond. Neck arched by the reins held tight in his master's gloved hands, the warhorse Calaras drew up, breaking billowing, lather streaming down its sleek black neck and chest. The sight gave the onrushing groom a pause.

The huge man commanding this formidable beast then dismounted, abandoning the reins to dangle and strode without comment into the Great House. Household servants scrambled like hens from his path.

There was no hint of emotion upon the Lord's face, but this was a detail well known and not unexpected. Draconus gave nothing away, and perhaps it was the mystery in those so-dark eyes that had ever been the source of his power. His likeness, brushed by the brilliant artist Kadaspala of House Enes, now commanded pride of place in the Citadel's Hall of Portraits, and it was indeed a hand of genius that had managed to capture the unknowable in Draconus's visage, the hint of something beyond the perfection of his Tiste features, a deepening behind the proof of his pure blood. It was the image of a man who was king in all but name.

Arathan stood at the window of the Old Tower, having taken position there upon hearing the be-

announcing his father's imminent return. He watched Draconus ride into the courtyard, eyes missing nothing, one hand up to his face as he bit skin and pieces of nail from his fingers – the tips were red, nubs, swollen with endless spit, and on occasion they bled, staining the sheets of his bed at night. He studied the movements of Draconus as the huge man dismounted, carelessly abandoning Calaras to the grooms, to then stride towards the entrance.

The three-storey tower commanded the northwest corner of the Great House, with the house's main doors to the right and out of sight from the upper floor's window. At moments like these, Arathan would tense, breath held, straining with all his senses for the moment when his father crossed the threshold and set foot on the hard bared stones of the vestibule. He waited, for a change in the atmosphere, a trembling in the ancient walls of the edifice, the very thunder of the Lord's presence.

As ever, there was nothing. And Arathan never knew if the failing was his, or if his father's power was sealed away inside that imposing frame and behind those unerring eyes, contained by a will verging on perfection. He suspected the former – he saw how others reacted, the tightening expressions among the highborn, the shying away of those of lesser rank, and how on occasion both reactions warred within the same individual. Draconus was feared for reasons Arathan could not comprehend.

In truth, he did not expect more of himself in this matter. He was a bastard son, after all, and a child born of a mother he never knew and had never heard named. In his seventeen years of life he had been in the same room with his father perhaps twenty times; surely no more than that, and not once had Draconus addressed him. He was not privileged to dine in the main hall; he was tutored in private and taught the use of weapons alongside the recruits of the Houseblades. Even in the days and nights immediately following his near-drowning, when in his ninth winter he'd fallen through ice, he'd been attended to by the guards' healer, and had received no visitors barring his three younger half-sisters who had peered in through the doorway – a trio of round, wide-eyed faces – only to immediately flee down the corridor voicing squeals.

For years, their reaction upon seeing him had led Arathan to believe he was unaccountably ugly, a conviction that had first brought his hands to his face in a habit of hiding his features, and soon the kiss of his own fingertips served for all the tactile reassurance he required. He no longer believed himself to be ugly. Simply ... plain, not worthy of notice by anyone.

Though no one ever spoke of his mother, Arathan knew that she had named him. His father's predilections on such matters were far crueller. He told himself that he remembered his half-sister's mother, a brooding, heavy woman with a strange face, who had either died or departed shortly after weaning the triplets she had borne, but a later comment from Tutor Sagander suggested that the woman he'd remembered had been a wet-nurse, a witch of the Dog-Runners who dwelt beyond the Solitude. Still, he preferred to think of her as the girls' mother, too kind-hearted to give them the names they now possessed – names that, to Arathan's mind, shackled each sister like a curse.

Envy. Spite. Malice. They remained infrequent visitors to his company. Flighty as birds glimpsed from the corner of an eye. Whispering from around corners in the corridors and behind doors as he walked past. Clearly, they found him a source of great amusement.

Now in the first years of adulthood, Arathan saw himself as a prisoner, or perhaps a hostage in the traditional manner of alliance-binding among the Greater Houses and Holds. He was not of the Draconus family; though there had been no efforts at hiding his bloodline, in fact the very indifference of this detail only emphasized its irrelevance. Seeds spill where they may, but a sire must look into the eyes to make the child his own. And this Draconus would not do. Besides, there was little of Tis's blood in him – he had not the fair skin or tall frame, and his eyes, while dark, lacked the mercurial ambivalence of the pure-born. In these details, he was the same as his sisters. Where, then, the blood of their father?

It hides. Somehow, it hides deep within us.

~~Draconus would not acknowledge him, but that was no cause for resentment in Arathan's mind.~~ Man or woman, once childhood was past the world beyond must be met, and a place in it made, by will entirely dependent upon its own resources. And the shaping of that world, its weight and weight was a match to the strength of that will. In this way, Kurald Galain society was a true map of talent and capacity. Or so Sagander told him, almost daily.

Whether in the court of the Citadel or among the March villages, there could be no dissembling. The insipid and the incompetent had no place in which to hide their failings. *'This is natural justice, Arathan, and thus by every measure it is superior to the justice of, say, the Forulkan, or the Jaghut.'* Arathan had no good reason to believe otherwise. This world, so forcefully espoused by his tutor, was all he had ever known.

And yet he ... doubted.

Sandalled feet slapped closer up the spiral stairs behind him, and Arathan turned in some surprise. He had long since claimed this tower for his own, made himself lord of its dusty webs, its shadows and echoes. Only here could he be himself, with no one batting his hand away from his mouth, mocking his ruined fingertips. No one visited him here; the house-bells called him when lessons or meals were imminent; he measured his days and nights by those muted chimes.

The footsteps approached. His heart thumped in his chest. He snatched his hand away from his mouth, wiped the fingers on his tunic, and stood facing the gap of the stairs.

The figure that climbed into view startled him. One of his half-sisters, the shortest of the three *last from the womb* – her face flushed with the effort of the climb, her breath coming in little gasps. Dark eyes found his. 'Arathan.'

She had never before addressed him. He did not know how to respond.

'It's me,' she said, eyes flaring as if in anger. 'Malice. Your sister, Malice.'

'Names shouldn't be curses,' Arathan said without thinking.

If his words shocked her, the only indication was a faint tilt of her head as she regarded him. 'So you're not the simpleton Envy says you are. Good. Father will be ... relieved.'

'Father?'

'You are summoned, Arathan. Right now – I'm to bring you to him.'

'Father?'

She scowled. 'She knew you'd be hiding here, like a redge in a hole. Said you were just as thick as I. Are you? Is she right? Are you a redge? She's always right – or so she'll tell you.' She darted closer and took Arathan's left wrist, tugged him along as she returned to the stairs.

He did not resist.

Father had summoned him. He could think of only one reason for that.

I am about to be cast out.

The dusty air of the Old Tower stairs swirled round them as they descended, and the peace of that place felt shattered. But soon it would settle again, and the emptiness would return, like an ousted king to his throne, and Arathan knew that he would never again challenge that domain. It had been a foolish conceit, a childish game.

'In natural justice, Arathan, the weak cannot hide, unless we grant them the privilege. And to understand, it is ever a privilege, for which the weak should be eternally grateful. At any given moment, should the strong will it, they can swing a sword and end the life of the weak. And that will be today's lesson. Forbearance.'

A redge in a hole – the beast's life is tolerated, until its presence becomes a nuisance, and then the dogs are loosed down the earthen tunnel, into the warrens, and somewhere beneath the ground the redge is torn apart, ripped to pieces. Or driven into the open, where wait spears and swords eager

take its life.

Either way, the creature was clearly unmindful of the privileges granted to it.

All the lessons Sagander delivered to Arathan circled like wolves around weakness, and the proper place of those cursed with it. No, Arathan was not a simpleton. He understood well enough.

And, one day, he would hurt Draconus, in ways not yet imaginable. *Father, I believe I am your weakness.*

In the meantime, as he hurried along behind Malice, her grip tight on his wrist, he brought up his other hand, and chewed.

Master-at-arms Ivis wiped sweat from his brow while he waited outside the door. The summons had come while he'd been in the smithy, instructing the iron-master on the proper honing of a folded edge. It was said that those with Hust blood knew iron as if they'd suckled its molten stream from the mother's tit, and Ivis had no doubt in this matter – the smith was a skilled man and a fine maker of weapons, but Ivis possessed Hust blood on his father's side, and though he counted himself a soldier through and through, he could hear a flawed edge even as a blade was being drawn from its scabbard.

Iron-master Gilal took it well enough, although of course there was no telling. He'd ducked his head and muttered his apologies as befitted his lesser rank, and as Ivis left he heard the huge man bellowing at his apprentices – none of whom was in any way responsible for the flawed edge, since the final stages of blade preparation were always by the iron-master's own hand. With that tirade Ivis knew that no venom would come back his way from the iron-master.

He told himself now, as he waited outside his lord's Chamber of Campaigns, that the sweat stinging his eyes was a legacy of the four forges in the smithy, the air wretched with heat and bitter metal, with coal dust and smoke, with the frantic efforts of the workers as they struggled with the day's demands.

Abyss knew, the smithy was no factory, and yet it had achieved an impressive rate of stock production in the past two months, and not one of the new recruits coming to the Great House was left unarmoured or weaponless for long. Making his task that much easier.

But now the Lord was back, unexpectedly, and Ivis scoured his mind for the possible cause. Draconus was a measured man, not prone to precipitous acts. He had the patience of stone, but he knew the risk of wronging him. Something had brought him back to the Great House, and a night's hard ride would not have left him in a good mood.

And now a summons, only to be left waiting here outside the door. No, none of this was normal.

A moment later he heard footsteps and the portal clicked open. Ivis found himself staring into the face of the House tutor, Sagander. The old scholar had the look of a man who had been frightened and was still fighting its aftermath. Meeting Ivis's eyes, he nodded. 'Captain, the Lord will see you now.'

That, and nothing more. Sagander edged past, made his way down the passageway, walking as if he'd aged a half-dozen years in the last few moments. At the notion, Ivis berated himself. He hardly ever saw the tutor, who overslept every morning and was often the last to make bed at night – there was no reason to imagine Sagander was anything more than disquieted by the early meeting, and perhaps an understandable stiffness as came with the elderly this early in the morning.

Drawing a steadying breath, Ivis strode into the chamber.

The old title of this room was acquiring new significance, but the campaigns of decades past had been conducted against foreign enemies; this time the only enemy was the mutually exclusive ambitions of the Holds and Greater Houses. The Lord's charnel house smithy was nothing more than reasonable caution these days. Besides, as Mother Dark's Consort, there was nothing unusual about Draconus bolstering the complement of his Houseblades until it was second only to that of Mother Dark herself. For some reason, other Holds were not as sanguine about the martial expansion of Hou

Dracons.

The politics of the matter held no real interest for Ivis. His task was to train this modest army.

The round table dominating the centre of the room had been cut from the bole of a three-thousand-year-old blackwood. Its rings were bands of red and black beneath the thick, amber varnish. It had been placed in this chamber by the founder of the House half a thousand years ago, to mark her extraordinary rise from Lesser House to Greater House. Since her sudden death ten years past, her adopted son, Draconus, commanded the family holdings; and if Srela's ambitions had been impressive, they were nothing compared to those of her chosen son.

There were no portraits on the walls, and the heavy wool hangings, undyed and raw, were there for warmth alone, as was the thick rug underfoot.

Draconus was breaking his fast at the table: bread and watered wine. A scatter of scrolls surrounded the pewter plate before him.

When it seemed that Draconus had not noticed his arrival, Ivis said, 'Lord.'

'Report on his progress, captain.'

Ivis frowned, resisted wiping at his brow again. Upon reflection, he'd known this was coming. The boy was in his year, after all. 'He possesses natural skill, Lord, as befits his sire. But his hands are weak yet – that habit of gnawing on his nails has left the pads soft and easily torn.'

'Is he diligent?'

Still Draconus was yet to look up, intent on his meal.

'At his exercises, Lord? It is hard to say. There is an air of the effortless about him. For all that he would work him, or set the best recruits against him on the sand, he remains ... unpressed.'

Draconus grunted. 'And does that frustrate you, captain?'

'That I have yet to truly test him, yes, Lord, it does. I do not have as much time with him as I would like, though I understand the necessity for higher tutoring. Still, as a young swordsman, there is much to admire in his ease.'

Finally, the Lord glanced up. 'Is there, now?' He leaned back, pushing the plate away with the remnants of crust and drippings. 'Find him a decent sword, some light chain, gauntlets, vambraces and greaves. And a helm. Then instruct the stables to ready him a solid warhorse – I know, he has not yet learned to ride a charger, so be sure the beast is not wilful.'

Ivis blinked. 'Lord, every horse is wilful beneath an uncertain rider.'

As if he'd not heard, Draconus continued, 'A mare, I think, young, eager to fix eye and ear on Calaras.'

Eager? More like terrified.

Perhaps Ivis had given something of his thoughts away in his face, for his lord smiled. 'Think you cannot control my mount? Oh, and a spare horse along with the charger. One of the walkers. Make it a gelding.'

Ah, then not returning to Kharkanas. 'Lord, shall this be a long journey?'

Draconus stood, and only now did Ivis note the shadows under the man's eyes. 'Yes,' and then as if answering a question Ivis had not voiced, 'and this time, I shall ride with my son.'

Malice pulled him into the corridor leading to the Chamber of Campaigns. Arathan knew it only by name; not once had he ventured into his father's favoured room. He drew back, stretching the line between himself and his sister.

She twisted round, face darkening – and then she suddenly relaxed, loosening her grip on his wrist. 'Like a hare in the autumn, you are. Is that what you think he wants to see?'

'I don't know what he wants to see,' Arathan replied. 'How could I?'

‘Did you see Clawface Ivis leaving? He was just ahead – took the courtyard passage. He’ll have reported on you. He’ll have talked about you. And now Father’s waiting. To see for himself.’—

‘Clawface?’

‘Because of his scars—’

‘Those aren’t scars,’ Arathan said, ‘it’s just age. Ivis Yerrthust fought in the Forulkan War. They starved on the retreat – they all did. That’s where those lines on his face came from.’

She was staring at him as if he’d lost his wits. ‘What do you think will happen, Arathan?’

‘About what?’

‘If he doesn’t like what he sees.’

Arathan shrugged. Even this close to his father – thirty paces down a broad corridor and then a door – still he could feel nothing. The air was unchanged, as if power was nothing but an illusion. The notion startled him, but he would not draw close to it, not yet. This was not the time to see where he was led.

‘He’ll kill you,’ said Malice.

He studied her face, caught the amused glint, the faintest hint of a smirk. ‘Names shouldn’t be curses,’ he said.

She pointed up the corridor. ‘He’s waiting. We’ll probably never see you again, unless we go behind the kitchen – below the chute where the carved-up bones and guts come out. Bits of you will be on the Crow Mound. I’ll keep a lock of your hair. Knotted. I won’t even wash out the blood.’

Pushing past him, she hurried away.

Clawface is a cruel name. I wonder what name they’ve given me.

He set his eyes on the distant door and set off, footfalls echoing. His father would not kill him. He could have done that long ago, and there was no reason to now. None of Arathan’s own failings reflected a thing upon his father. Sagander told him so, over and over again. This was not a settling of shadows, because the sun’s light, no matter how pale or dim, could never descry the binding lines of blood, and in place of light no words had been spoken to make it otherwise.

Reaching the door, he hesitated, wiped dry his fingers, and then rattled the iron loop beneath the latch. A muted voice bid him enter. Wondering at his lack of fear, Arathan opened the door and stepped into the chamber.

A heavy lanolin smell was the first thing to strike him, and then the light, sharp and bright from the east-facing window where the shutters had been thrown back. The air was still cool but rapidly warming as the day awakened. The sight of breakfast leavings on the enormous table reminded him that he’d not yet eaten. When his gaze finally lifted to his father, he found the man’s dark eyes fixed on him.

‘It may be,’ said Draconus, ‘that you believe she did not want you. You have lived a life with no answers to your questions – but for that I will not apologize. She knew that her choice would hurt you. I can tell you that it hurt her, as well. I hope that one day you will understand this, and that, indeed, you will find it in your heart to forgive her.’

Arathan said nothing because he could not think of anything to say. He watched as his father rose from the chair, and it was only now – now that he was so near – that Arathan finally felt the power emanating from Draconus. He was both tall and solid, with a warrior’s build, and yet there was grace to the man that was, perhaps, more impressive than anything else.

‘What we desire in our hearts, Arathan, and what must be ... well, that is a rare embrace, so rare you’re likely to never know it. You have lived that truth. I have no promises to make you. I cannot say what awaits you, but you are now in your year and the time has come for you to make your life.’ He paused for a time, continuing to study Arathan, and the dark eyes flicked but once down to the hands and Arathan struggled not to hide them further, leaving them at his sides, the thin fingers long and

tipped in red. ‘Sit down,’ Draconus instructed.

Arathan looked round, found a high-backed chair against the wall to the left of the doorway, and walked over to it. It looked ancient, weakened with age. He’d made the wrong choice – but the other chair had been the one his father had been sitting in at the table, and that would have set his back to Draconus. After a moment, he settled uneasily on the antique.

His father grunted. ‘I’ll grant you, they do better with stone,’ he said. ‘I have no intention of bringing you to the Citadel, Arathan – and no, it is not shame that guides that decision. There is a growing tension in Kurald Galain. I shall do my utmost to placate the bereaved elements among the Greater Houses and Holds, but my position is far more precarious than you might think. Even among the Greater Houses I am still viewed as something of an outsider, and with more than a little mistrust.’ He drew up then and shot Arathan a glance. ‘But then, you know little of all this, do you?’

‘You are Consort to Mother Dark,’ Arathan said.

‘Do you know what that means?’

‘No, except that she has chosen you to stand at her side.’

There was a slight tightening round his father’s eyes at that, but the man simply nodded. ‘That decision which seems to have placed me between her and the highborn Holds – all of whom bear the titles of sons and daughters of Mother Dark.’

‘Sons and daughters – but not by birth?’

Draconus nodded. ‘An affectation? Or an assertion of unshakeable loyalty? By each claimant the scales shift.’

‘Am I such a son to you, Lord?’

The question clearly caught Draconus off guard. His eyes searched Arathan’s face. ‘No,’ he finally replied, but did not elaborate. ‘I cannot guarantee your safety in Kurald Galain – even in the Citadel itself. Nor could you hope to expect any manner of loyalty from Mother Dark.’

‘I understand that much, Lord.’

‘I must journey to the west, and you will accompany me.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘I must leave her side for a time – knowing well the risk – and so I shall have no patience if you falter on the trek.’

‘Of course, Lord.’

Draconus was silent for a moment, as if considering Arathan’s easy reply, and then he said. ‘Sagander will accompany us, to continue your education. But in this detail I must charge you with his care – though he has longed to visit the Azathanai and the Jaghut for half his life, it seems that his opportunity has very nearly come too late. Now, I do not believe he is as feeble as he imagines himself to be. Nevertheless, you will attend to him.’

‘I understand. Lord, will Master-at-arms Ivis—’

‘No – he is needed elsewhere. Gate Sergeant Raskan and four Borderswords will attend us. This is not a leisurely journey. We shall ride at pace, with spare mounts. The Bareth Solitude is inhospitable no matter the season.’

‘Lord, when do we leave?’

‘The day after tomorrow.’

‘Lord, do you intend leaving me with the Azathanai?’

Draconus had walked to the open window. ‘It may be,’ he said, looking at something in the courtyard, ‘that you will believe I do not want you, Arathan.’

‘Lord, there is no need to apologize.’

‘I am aware of that. Go to Sagander now, help him pack.’

‘Yes, Lord.’ Arathan stood, bowed to his father’s back, and then strode from the chamber.

His legs felt weak as he made his way back down the corridor. He had not comported himself well, not in this, his first true meeting with his father. He had sounded foolish, naïve, disappointing the man who had sired him. Perhaps these were things all sons felt before their fathers. But time moved forward or not at all; and there was nothing he could do to change what had already taken place.

Sagander often spoke of building upon what has gone before, and that one must be mindful of that at every moment, with every choice made and about to be made. Even mistakes offered scraps. Arathan told himself. He could build from broken sticks and weathered bones if need be. Perhaps such constructs would prove weak, but then he had little weight for them to hold. He was a bastard son with an unknown mother, and his father was sending him away.

The ice is thin. Hard to find purchase. It is dangerous to walk here.

Sagander well remembered the day the boy almost drowned. It haunted him, but in curious ways. When he was left with too many questions in his own life, when the mysteries of the world crowded close round him, he would think of that ice. Rotted from beneath by the foul gases rising up from the cattle sludge lying thick on the old quarry's lifeless rubble beneath thirty arm-spans of dark water, and after days of unseasonal warmth and then bitter cold, the ice had looked solid enough, but eyes were weak at distinguishing truth from lies. And though the boy had ventured alone on to its slick surface, Sagander could feel the treachery beneath his own feet – not those of Arathan on that chill, clear morning, but beneath the scholar himself; and he would hear the creaking, and then the dread crackling sound, and he was moments from tottering, from pitching down as the world gave way under him.

It was ridiculous. He should be excited. Before him, so late now in his life, he was about to journey among the Azathanai and beyond, to the Jaghut. Where his questions would find answers; where mysteries would come clear, all truths revealed, and peace would settle on his soul. And yet, each time his thoughts skated towards that imminent blessing of knowledge, he thought of ice, and fear took hold of him then, as he waited for the cracking sounds.

Things should make sense. From one end to the other, no matter from which direction one elected to begin the journey, everything should fit. Fitting neatly was the gift of order, proof of control, and from control, mastery. He would not accept an unknowable world. Mysteries needed hunting down. Like the fierce wrashan that had once roamed the Blackwood: all their dark roosts were discovered until there were no places left for the beasts to hide, the slaughter was made complete, and now at last one could walk in safety in the great forest, and no howls ever broke the benign silence. Blackwood Forest had become knowable. Safe.

They would journey to the Azathanai, and to the Odhan of the Jaghut, perhaps even to Omtos Phellack itself, the Empty City. But best of all, he would finally see the First House of the Azath, and perhaps even speak with the Builders who served it. And he would return to Kurald Galain in crowning glory, with all he needed to fuel a blazing resurrection of his reputation as a scholar, and all those who had turned away from him, not even hiding their disdain, would now come flocking back, like puppies, and he would happily greet them – with his boot.

No, his life was not yet over.

There is no ice. The world is sure and solid beneath me. Listen! There is nothing.

A scratching knock at his door made Sagander close his eyes briefly. Arathan. How could a man such as Draconus sire such a child? Oh, Arathan was bright enough, and by all reports Ivis had run off with things he could teach the boy in matters of swordcraft. But such skills were of little real value. Weapons were the swift recourse among those who failed at reason or feared truth. Sagander had done his best with Arathan but it seemed likely that, despite the boy's cleverness, he was destined for mediocrity. What other future could be expected from an unwanted child?

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