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a weaver of ancient epics' SALON.COM



STEVEN ERIKSON



Memories of Ice

A TALE OF THE MALAZAN BOOK OF THE FALLEN

About the Book

The ravaged continent of Genabackis has given birth to a terrifying new empire: the Pannion Domin. Like a tide of corrupted blood, it seethes across the land, devouring all who fail to heed the word of its prophet, the Pannion Seer. In its path stands an uneasy alliance: Dujek Onearm's Host and Whiskeyjack's veteran Bridgeburners alongside their enemies of old - the forces of Warlord Caladan Brood, Anomander Rake and his Tiste Andii, and the Rhivi people of the Plains. Outnumbered and mistrustful, they must get word to potential allies, including the mercenary brotherhood, the Grey Swords, whose orders are to hold the besieged city of Capustan at all costs.

But more ancient clans too are gathering. As if in answer to some primal summons, the T'lan Imass have risen. For it would seem something altogether darker and more malign threatens this world. The Warrens are poisoned and rumours abound that the Crippled God is now unchained and intent on a terrible revenge...

Marking the return of many characters from Gardens of the Moon and introducing a host of remarkable new players, *Memories of Ice* is both a momentous new chapter in Steven Erikson's magnificent epic fantasy and a triumph of storytelling.

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Also by Steven Erikson

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Memories of Ice
———A Tale of the———
Malazan Book of the Fallen

STEVEN ERIKSON

To R. S. Lundin

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

THE CARAVANSERAI

Gruntle, a caravan guard

Stonny Menackis, a caravan guard

Harllo, a caravan guard

Buke, a caravan guard

Bauchelain, an explorer

Korbal Broach, his silent partner

Emancipor Reese, a manservant

Keruli, a trader

Marble, a sorceror

IN Capustan

Brukhalian, Mortal Sword of Fener's Reve (the Grey Swords)

Itkovian, Shield Anvil of Fener's Reve (the Grey Swords)

Karnadas, Destriant of Fener's Reve (the Grey Swords)

Recruit Velbara (the Grey Swords)

Master Sergeant Norul (the Grey Swords)

Farakalian (the Grey Swords)

Nakalian (the Grey Swords)

Torun (the Grey Swords)

Sidlis (the Grey Swords)

Nilbanas (the Grey Swords)

Jelarkan, prince and ruler of Capustan

Arard, prince and ruler in absentia of Coral
Rath'Fener (Priest of the Mask Council)
Rath'Shadowthrone (Priest of the Mask Council)
Rath'Queen of Dreams (Priestess of the Mask Council)
Rath'Hood (Priest of the Mask Council)
Rath'D'rek (Priest of the Mask Council)
Rath'Trake (Priest of the Mask Council)
Rath'Burn (Priestess of the Mask Council)
Rath'Togg (Priest of the Mask Council)
Rath'Fanderay (Priestess of the Mask Council)
Rath'Dessembrae (Priestess of the Mask Council)
Rath'Oponn (Priest of the Mask Council)
Rath'Beru (Priest of the Mask Council)

ONEARM'S Host

Dujek Onearm, commander of renegade Malazan army
Whiskeyjack, second-in-command of renegade Malazan army
Twist, commander of the Black Moranth
Artanthos, standard-bearer of renegade Malazan army
Barack, a liaison officer
Hareb, a noble-born captain
Ganoes Paran, Captain, Bridgeburners
Antsy, sergeant, 7th Squad, Bridgeburners
Picker, corporal, 7th Squad, Bridgeburners
Detoran, soldier, 7th Squad
Spindle, mage and sapper, 7th Squad
Blend, soldier, 7th Squad
Mallet, healer, 9th Squad

Hedge, sapper, 9th Squad
Trotts, soldier, 9th Squad
Quick Ben, mage, 9th Squad
Aimless (Bridgeburner corporal)
Bucklund (Bridgeburner sergeant)
Runter (Bridgeburner sapper)
Mulch (Bridgeburner healer)
Bluepearl (Bridgeburner mage)
Shank (Bridgeburner mage)
Toes (Bridgeburner mage)

Brood's Host

Caladan Brood, warlord of liberation army on Genabackis
Anomander Rake, Lord of Moon's Spawn
Kallor, the High King, Brood's second-in-command
The Mhybe, matron of the Rhivi Tribes
Silverfox, the Rhivi Reborn
Korlat, a Tiste Andii Soletaken
Orfantal, Korlat's brother
Hurlochel, an outrider in the liberation army
Crone, a Great Raven and companion to Anomander Rake

The Barghast

Humbrall Taur, warchief of the White Face Clan
Hetan, his daughter
Cafal, his first son
Netok, his second son

Darujhistan Envoys

Coll, an ambassador
Estraysian D'Arle, a councilman
Baruk, an alchemist
Kruppe, a citizen
Murillio, a citizen

The T'lan Imass

Kron, ruler of the Kron T'lan Imass
Cannig Tol, clan chief
Bek Okhan, a Bonecaster
Pran Chole, a Bonecaster
Okral Lom, a Bonecaster
Bendal Home, a Bonecaster
Ay Estos, a Bonecaster
Olar Ethil, the First Bonecaster and First Soletaken
Tool, the Shorn, once First Sword
Kilava, a renegade Bonecaster
Lanas Tog, of Kerluhm T'lan Imass

The Pannion Domin

The Seer, priest-king of the Domin
Ultentha, Septarch of Coral
Kulpath, Septarch of the besieging army
Inal, Septarch of Lest
Anaster, a Tenescowri Child of the Dead Seed
Seerdomin Kahlt

Others

K'rul, an Elder God

Draconus, an Elder God

Sister of Cold Nights, an Elder Goddess

Lady Envy, a resident of Morn

Gethol, a Herald

Treach, a First Hero (the Tiger of Summer)

Toc the Younger, Aral Fayle, a Malazan scout

Garath, a large dog

Baaljagg, a larger wolf

Mok, a Seguleh

Thurule, a Seguleh

Senu, a Seguleh

The Chained One, an unknown ascendant (also known as the Crippled God)

The Witch of Tennes Munug, a Daru artisan

Talamandas, a Barghast sticksnare

Ormulogun, artist in Onearm's Host

Gumble, his critic

Haradas, a Trygalle Trade Guild caravan master

Azra Jael, a marine in Onearm's Host

Straw, a Mott Irregular

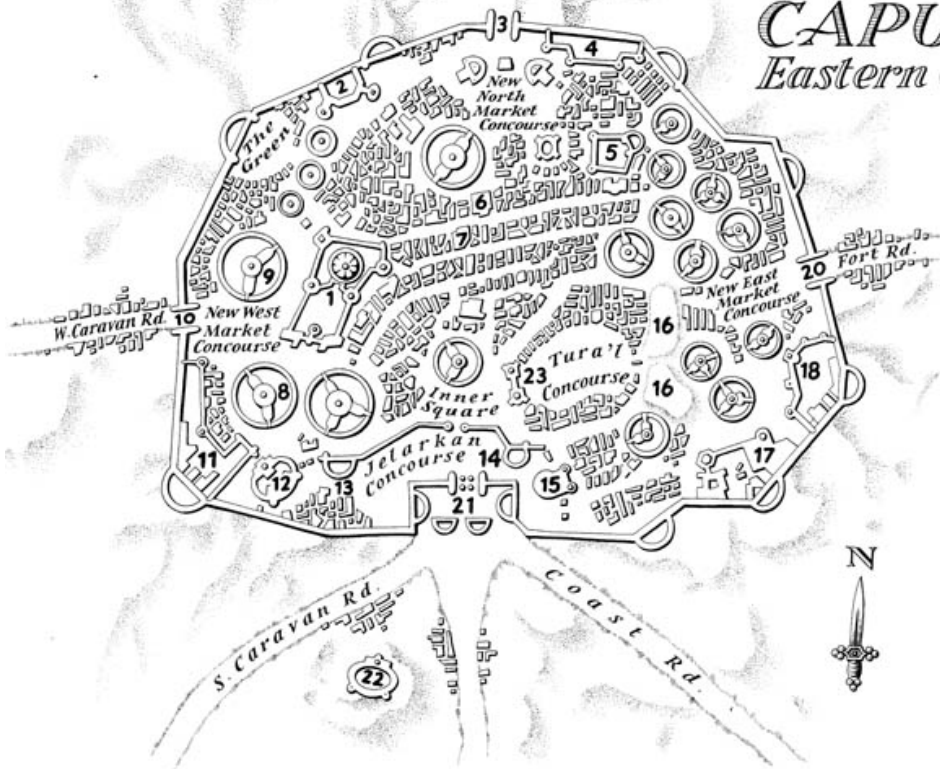
Sty, a Mott Irregular

Stump, a Mott Irregular

Job Bole, a Mott Irregular

CAPUSTAN

Eastern Genabackis



- 1 The Thrall
- 2 Lektar House
- 3 North Gate
- 4 North Barracks
- 5 Inside Barracks
- 6 Bauchelain's Estate
- 7 Gruntle's Tenement
- 8 Tular Camp
- 9 Senar Camp
- 10 West Gate
- 11 West Barracks
- 12 Jhebar Tower



- 13 W. Inside Tower
- 14 E. Inside Tower
- 15 Ne'rok Tower
- 16 Cemeteries
- 17 Grey Sword Barracks
- 18 Jelarkan's Palace
- 19 E. Watch Redoubt
- 20 East Gate
- 21 South Gate
- 22 S. Watch Redoubt
- 23 Arch

PROLOGUE

The ancient wars of the T'lan Imass and the Jaghut saw the world torn asunder. Vast armies contended on the ravaged lands, the dead piled high, their bone the bones of hills, their spilled blood the blood of seas. Sorceries raged until the sky itself was fire ...

Ancient Histories, Vol. I
Kinicik Karbar'n

I

Maeth'ki Im (Pogrom of the Rotted Flower), the 33rd Jaghut War

298,665 years before Burn's Sleep

SWALLOWS DARTED THROUGH the clouds of midges dancing over the mudflats. The sky above the marsh remained grey, but it had lost its mercurial wintry gleam, and the warm wind sighing through the air above the ravaged land held the scent of healing.

What had once been the inland freshwater sea the Imass called Jaghra Til – born from the shattering of the Jaghut ice-fields – was now in its own death-throes. The pallid overcast was reflected in dwindling pools and stretches of knee-deep water for as far south as the eye could scan, but none the less, newly birthed land dominated the vista.

The breaking of the sorcery that had raised the glacial age returned to the region the old, natural seasons, but the memories of mountain-high ice lingered. The exposed bedrock to the north was gouged and scraped, its basins filled with boulders. The heavy silts that had been the floor of the inland sea still bubbled with escaping gases, as the land, freed of the enormous weight with the glaciers' passing eight years past, continued its slow ascent.

Jaghra Til's life had been short, yet the silts that had settled on its bottom were thick. And treacherous.

Pran Chole, Bonecaster of Cannig Tol's clan among the Kron Imass, sat motionless atop a mostly buried boulder along an ancient beach ridge. The descent before him was snarled in low, wiry grasses and withered driftwood. Twelve paces beyond, the land dropped slightly, then stretched out into a broad basin of mud.

Three ranag had become trapped in a boggy sinkhole twenty paces into the basin. A bull male, his mate and their calf, ranged in a pathetic defensive circle. Mired and vulnerable, they must have seemed easy kills for the pack of ay that found them.

But the land was treacherous indeed. The large tundra wolves had succumbed to the same fate as the ranag. Pran Chole counted six ay, including a yearling. Tracks indicated that another yearling had circled the sinkhole dozens of times before wandering westward, doomed no doubt to die in solitude.

How long ago had this drama occurred? There was no way to tell. The mud had hardened on ranag and ay alike, forming cloaks of clay latticed with cracks. Spots of bright green showed where wind-borne seeds had germinated, and the Bonecaster was reminded of his visions when spirit-walking – a host of mundane details twisted into something unreal. For the beasts, the struggle had become eternal, hunter and hunted locked together for all time.

Someone padded to his side, crouched down beside him.

Pran Chole's tawny eyes remained fixed on the frozen tableau. The rhythm of footsteps told the Bonecaster the identity of his companion, and now came the warm-blooded smells that were as much a signature as resting eyes upon the man's face.

Cannig Tol spoke. 'What lies beneath the clay, Bonecaster?'

'Only that which has shaped the clay itself, Clan Leader.'

'You see no omen in these beasts?'

Pran Chole smiled. 'Do you?'

Cannig Tol considered for a time, then said, 'Ranag are gone from these lands. So too the ay. We see before us an ancient battle. These statements have depth, for they stir my soul.'

'Mine as well,' the Bonecaster conceded.

‘We hunted the ranag until they were no more, and this brought starvation to the ay, for we had also hunted the tenag until they were no more as well. The agkor who walk with the bhederin would not share with the ay, and now the tundra is empty. From this, I conclude that we were wasteful and thoughtless in our hunting.’

‘Yet the need to feed our own young ...’

‘The need for more young was great.’

‘It remains so, Clan Leader.’

Cannig Tol grunted. ‘The Jaghut were powerful in these lands, Bonecaster. They did not flee – not at first. You know the cost in Imass blood.’

‘And the land yields its bounty to answer that cost.’

‘To serve our war.’

‘Thus, the depths are stirred.’

The Clan Leader nodded and was silent.

Pran Chole waited. In their shared words they still tracked the skin of things. Revelation of the muscle and bone was yet to come. But Cannig Tol was no fool, and the wait was not long.

‘We are as those beasts.’

The Bonecaster’s eyes shifted to the south horizon, tightened.

Cannig Tol continued, ‘We are the clay, and our endless war against the Jaghut is the struggling beast beneath. The surface is shaped by what lies beneath.’ He gestured with one hand. ‘And before us now, in these creatures slowly turning to stone, is the curse of eternity.’

There was still more. Pran Chole said nothing.

‘Ranag and ay,’ Cannig Tol resumed. ‘Almost gone from the mortal realm. Hunter and hunted both.’

‘To the very bones,’ the Bonecaster whispered.

‘Would that you had seen an omen,’ the Clan Leader muttered, rising.

Pran Chole also straightened. ‘Would that I had,’ he agreed in a tone that only faintly echoed Cannig Tol’s wry,

sardonic utterance.

‘Are we close, Bonecaster?’

Pran Chole glanced down at his shadow, studied the antlered silhouette, the figure hinted within furred cape, ragged hides and headdress. The sun’s angle made him seem tall – almost as tall as a Jaghut. ‘Tomorrow,’ he said. ‘They are weakening. A night of travel will weaken them yet more.’

‘Good. Then the clan shall camp here tonight.’

The Bonecaster listened as Cannig Tol made his way back down to where the others waited. With darkness, Pran Chole would spiritwalk. Into the whispering earth, seeking those of his own kind. While their quarry was weakening, Cannig Tol’s clan was yet weaker. Less than a dozen adults remained. When pursuing Jaghut, the distinction of hunter and hunted had little meaning.

He lifted his head and sniffed the crepuscular air. Another Bonecaster wandered this land. The taint was unmistakable. He wondered who it was, wondered why it travelled alone, bereft of clan and kin. And, knowing that even as he had sensed its presence so it in turn had sensed his, he wondered why it had not yet sought them out.

She pulled herself clear of the mud and dropped down onto the sandy bank, her breath coming in harsh, laboured gasps. Her son and daughter squirmed free of her leaden arms, crawled further onto the island’s modest hump.

The Jaghut mother lowered her head until her brow rested against the cool, damp sand. Grit pressed into the skin of her forehead with raw insistence. The burns there were too recent to have healed, nor were they likely to – she was defeated, and death had only to await the arrival of her hunters.

They were mercifully competent, at least. These Imass cared nothing for torture. A swift killing blow. For her, then for her children. And with them – with this meagre,

tattered family – the last of the Jaghut would vanish from this continent. Mercy arrived in many guises. Had they not joined in chaining Raest, they would all – Imass and Jaghut both – have found themselves kneeling before that Tyrant. A temporary truce of expedience. She'd known enough to flee once the chaining was done; she'd known, even then, that the Imass clan would resume the pursuit.

The mother felt no bitterness, but that made her no less desperate.

Sensing a new presence on the small island, her head snapped up. Her children had frozen in place, staring up in terror at the Imass woman who now stood before them. The mother's grey eyes narrowed. 'Clever, Bonecaster. My senses were tuned only to those behind us. Very well, be done with it.'

The young, black-haired woman smiled. 'No bargains, Jaghut? You always seek bargains to spare the lives of your children. Have you broken the kin-threads with these two, then? They seem young for that.'

'Bargains are pointless. Your kind never agree to them.'

'No, yet still *your* kind try.'

'I shall not. Kill us, then. Swiftly.'

The Imass was wearing the skin of a panther. Her eyes were as black and seemed to match its shimmer in the dying light. She looked well fed, her large, swollen breasts indicating she had recently birthed.

The Jaghut mother could not read the woman's expression, only that it lacked the typical grim certainty she usually associated with the strange, rounded faces of the Imass.

The Bonecaster spoke. 'I have enough Jaghut blood on my hands. I leave you to the Kron clan that will find you tomorrow.'

'To me,' the mother growled, 'it matters naught which of you kills us, only that you kill us.'

The woman's broad mouth quirked. 'I can see your point.'

Weariness threatened to overwhelm the Jaghut mother, but she managed to pull herself into a sitting position. 'What,' she asked between gasps, 'do you want?'

'To offer you a bargain.'

Breath catching, the Jaghut mother stared into the Bonecaster's dark eyes, and saw nothing of mockery. Her gaze then dropped, for the briefest of moments, on her son and daughter, then back up to hold steady on the woman's own.

The Imass slowly nodded.

The earth had cracked some time in the past, a wound of such depth as to birth a molten river wide enough to stretch from horizon to horizon. Vast and black, the river of stone and ash reached southwestward, down to the distant sea. Only the smallest of plants had managed to find purchase, and the Bonecaster's passage - a Jaghut child in the crook of each arm - raised sultry clouds of dust that hung motionless in her wake.

She judged the boy at perhaps five years of age; his sister perhaps four. Neither seemed entirely aware, and clearly neither had understood their mother when she'd hugged them goodbye. The long flight down the L'amath and across the Jagra Til had driven them both into shock. No doubt witnessing the ghastly death of their father had not helped matters.

They clung to her with their small, grubby hands, grim reminders of the child she had but recently lost. Before long, both began suckling at her breasts, evincing desperate hunger. Some time later, the children slept.

The lava flow thinned as she approached the coast. A range of hills rose into distant mountains on her right. A level plain stretched directly before her, ending at a ridge half a league distant. Though she could not see it, she knew

that just the other side of the ridge, the land slumped down to the sea. The plain itself was marked by regular humps, and the Bonecaster paused to study them. The mounds were arrayed in concentric circles, and at the centre was a larger dome – all covered in a mantle of lava and ash. The rotted tooth of a ruined tower rose from the plain's edge, at the base of the first line of hills. Those hills, as she had noted the first time she had visited this place, were themselves far too evenly spaced to be natural.

The Bonecaster lifted her head. The mingled scents were unmistakable, one ancient and dead, the other ... less so. The boy stirred in her clasp, but remained asleep.

'Ah,' she murmured, 'you sense it as well.'

Skirting the plain, she walked towards the blackened tower.

The warren's gate was just beyond the ragged edifice, suspended in the air at about six times her height. She saw it as a red welt, a thing damaged, but no longer bleeding. She could not recognize the warren – the old damage obscured the portal's characteristics. Unease rippled faintly through her.

The Bonecaster set the children down by the tower, then sat on a block of tumbled masonry. Her gaze fell to the two young Jaghut, still curled in sleep, lying on their beds of ash. 'What choice?' she whispered. 'It must be Omtose Phellack. It certainly isn't Tellann. Starvald Demelain? Unlikely.' Her eyes were pulled to the plain, narrowing on the mound rings. 'Who dwelt here? Who else was in the habit of building in stone?' She fell silent for a long moment, then swung her attention back to the ruin. 'This tower is the final proof, for it is naught else but Jaghut, and such a structure would not be raised this close to an inimical warren. No, the gate is Omtose Phellack. It must be so.'

Still, there were additional risks. An adult Jaghut in the warren beyond, coming upon two children not of its own

blood, might as easily kill them as adopt them. 'Then their deaths stain another's hands, a Jaghut's.' Scant comfort, that distinction. *It matters naught which of you kills us, only that you kill us.* The breath hissed between the woman's teeth. 'What choice?' she asked again.

She would let them sleep a little longer. Then, she would send them through the gate. A word to the boy – *take care of your sister. The journey will not be long.* And to them both – *your mother waits beyond.* A lie, but they would need courage. *If she cannot find you, then one of her kin will. Go then, to safety, to salvation.*

After all, what could be worse than death?

* * *

She rose as they approached. Pran Chole tested the air, frowned. The Jaghut had not unveiled her warren. Even more disconcerting, where were her children?

'She greets us with calm,' Cannig Tol muttered.

'She does,' the Bonecaster agreed.

'I've no trust in that – we should kill her immediately.'

'She would speak with us,' Pran Chole said.

'A deadly risk, to appease her desire.'

'I cannot disagree, Clan Leader. Yet ... what has she done with her children?'

'Can you not sense them?'

Pran Chole shook his head. 'Prepare your spearmen,' he said, stepping forward.

There was peace in her eyes, so clear an acceptance of her own imminent death that the Bonecaster was shaken. Pran Chole walked through shin-deep water, then stepped onto the island's sandy bank to stand face to face with the Jaghut. 'What have you done with them?' he demanded.

The mother smiled, lips peeling back to reveal her tusks. 'Gone.'

'Where?'

'Beyond your reach, Bonecaster.'

Pran Chole's frown deepened. 'These are our lands. There is no place here that is beyond our reach. Have you slain them with your own hands, then?'

The Jaghut cocked her head, studied the Imass. 'I had always believed you were united in your hatred for our kind. I had always believed that such concepts as compassion and mercy were alien to your natures.'

The Bonecaster stared at the woman for a long moment, then his gaze dropped away, past her, and scanned the soft clay ground. 'An Imass has been here,' he said. 'A woman. The Bonecaster—' *the one I could not find in my spiritwalk. The one who chose not to be found.* 'What has she done?'

'She has explored this land,' the Jaghut replied. 'She has found a gate far to the south. It is Omtose Phellack.'

'I am glad,' Pran Chole said, 'I am not a mother.' *And you, woman, should be glad I am not cruel.* He gestured. Heavy spears flashed past the Bonecaster. Six long, fluted heads of flint punched through the skin covering the Jaghut's chest. She staggered, then folded to the ground in a clatter of shafts.

Thus ended the thirty-third Jaghut War.

Pran Chole whirled. 'We've no time for a pyre. We must strike southward. Quickly.'

Cannig Tol stepped forward as his warriors went to retrieve their weapons. The Clan Leader's eyes narrowed on the Bonecaster. 'What distresses you?'

'A renegade Bonecaster has taken the children.'

'South?'

'To Morn.'

The Clan Leader's brows knitted.

'The renegade would save this woman's children. The renegade believes the Rent to be Omtose Phellack.'

Pran Chole watched the blood leave Cannig Tol's face. 'Go to Morn, Bonecaster,' the Clan Leader whispered. 'We are not cruel. Go now.'

Pran Chole bowed. The Tellann warren engulfed him.

The faintest release of her power sent the two Jaghut children upward, into the gate's maw. The girl cried out a moment before reaching it, a longing wail for her mother, who she imagined waited beyond. Then the two small figures vanished within.

The Bonecaster sighed and continued to stare upward, seeking any evidence that the passage had gone awry. It seemed, however, that no wounds had reopened, no gush of wild power bled from the portal. Did it look different? She could not be sure. This was new land for her; she had nothing of the bone-bred sensitivity that she had known all her life among the lands of the Tarad clan, in the heart of the First Empire.

The Tellann warren opened behind her. The woman spun round, moments from veering into her Soletaken form.

An arctic fox bounded into view, slowed upon seeing her, then sembled back into its Imass form. She saw before her a young man, wearing the skin of his totem animal across his shoulders, and a battered antler headdress. His expression was twisted with fear, his eyes not on her, but on the portal beyond.

The woman smiled. 'I greet you, fellow Bonecaster. Yes, I have sent them through. They are beyond the reach of your vengeance, and this pleases me.'

His tawny eyes fixed on her. 'Who are you? What clan?'

'I have left my clan, but I was once counted among the Logros. I am named Kilava.'

'You should have let me find you last night,' Pran Chole said. 'I would then have been able to convince you that a swift death was the greater mercy for those children than what you have done here, Kilava.'

'They are young enough to be adopted—'

'You have come to the place called Morn,' Pran Chole interjected, his voice cold. 'To the ruins of an ancient city—'

'Jaghut—'

‘Not Jaghut! This tower, yes, but it was built long afterward, in the time between the city’s destruction and the T’ol Ara’d – this flow of lava which but buried something already dead.’ He raised a hand, pointed towards the suspended gate. ‘It was this – this wounding – that destroyed the city, Kilava. The warren beyond – do you not understand? It is *not* Omtose Phellack! Tell me this – how are such wounds sealed? You know the answer, Bonecaster!’

The woman slowly turned, studied the Rent. ‘If a soul sealed that wound, then it should have been freed ... when the children arrived—’

‘Freed,’ Pran Chole hissed, ‘*in exchange!*’

Trembling, Kilava faced him again. ‘Then where is it? Why has it not appeared?’

Pran Chole turned to study the central mound on the plain. ‘Oh,’ he whispered, ‘but it has.’ He glanced back at his fellow Bonecaster. ‘Tell me, will you in turn give up your life for those children? They are trapped now, in an eternal nightmare of pain. Does your compassion extend to sacrificing yourself in yet another exchange?’ He studied her, then sighed. ‘I thought not, so wipe away those tears, Kilava. Hypocrisy ill suits a Bonecaster.’

‘What ...’ the woman managed after a time, ‘what has been freed?’

Pran Chole shook his head. He studied the central mound again. ‘I am not sure, but we shall have to do something about it, sooner or later. I suspect we have plenty of time. The creature must now free itself of its tomb, and that has been thoroughly warded. More, there is the T’ol Ara’d’s mantle of stone still clothing the barrow.’ After a moment, he added. ‘But time we shall have.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘The Gathering has been called. The Ritual of Tellann awaits us, Bonecaster.’

She spat. 'You are all insane. To choose immortality for the sake of a war - madness. I shall defy the call, Bonecaster.'

He nodded. 'Yet the Ritual shall be done. I have spirit-walked into the future, Kilava. I have seen my withered face of two hundred thousand and more years hence. We shall have our eternal war.'

Bitterness filled Kilava's voice. 'My brother will be pleased.'

'Who is your brother?'

'Onos T'oolan, the First Sword.'

Pran Chole turned at this. 'You are the Defier. You slaughtered your clan - your kin—'

'To break the link and thus achieve freedom, yes. Alas, my eldest brother's skills more than matched mine. Yet now we are *both* free, though what I celebrate, Onos T'oolan curses.' She wrapped her arms around herself, and Pran Chole saw upon her layers and layers of pain. Hers was a freedom he did not envy. She spoke again. 'This city, then. Who built it.'

'K'Chain Che'Malle.'

'I know the name, but little else of them.'

Pran Chole nodded. 'We shall, I expect, learn.'

II

*Continents of Korelri and Jacuruku, in the Time of Dying
119,736 years before Burn's Sleep (three years after the
Fall of the Crippled God)*

The Fall had shattered a continent. Forests had burned, the firestorms lighting the horizons in every direction, bathing crimson the heaving ash-filled clouds blanketing the sky. The conflagration had seemed unending, world-devouring,

weeks into months, and through it all could be heard the screams of a god.

Pain gave birth to rage. Rage, to poison, an infection sparing no-one.

Scattered survivors remained, reduced to savagery, wandering a landscape pocked with huge craters now filled with murky, lifeless water, the sky churning endlessly above them. Kinship had been dismembered, love had proved a burden too costly to carry. They ate what they could, often each other, and scanned the ravaged world around them with rapacious intent.

One figure walked this landscape alone. Wrapped in rotting rags, he was of average height, his features blunt and unprepossessing. There was a dark cast to his face, a heavy inflexibility in his eyes. He walked as if gathering suffering unto himself, unmindful of its vast weight; walked as if incapable of yielding, of denying the gifts of his own spirit.

In the distance, ragged bands eyed the figure as he strode, step by step, across what was left of the continent that would one day be called Korelri. Hunger might have driven them closer, but there were no fools left among the survivors of the Fall, and so they maintained a watchful distance, curiosity dulled by fear. For the man was an ancient god, and he walked among them.

Beyond the suffering he absorbed, K'rul would have willingly embraced their broken souls, yet he had fed – was feeding – on the blood spilled onto this land, and the truth was this: the power born of that would be needed.

In K'rul's wake, men and women killed men, killed women, killed children. Dark slaughter was the river the Elder God rode.

Elder Gods embodied a host of harsh unpleasantries.

The foreign god had been torn apart in his descent to earth. He had come down in pieces, in streaks of flame. His pain

was fire, screams and thunder, a voice that had been heard by half the world. Pain, and outrage. And, K'rul reflected, grief. It would be a long time before the foreign god could begin to reclaim the remaining fragments of its life, and so begin to unveil its nature. K'rul feared that day's arrival. From such a shattering could only come madness.

The summoners were dead. Destroyed by what they had called down upon them. There was no point in hating them, no need to conjure up images of what they in truth deserved by way of punishment. They had, after all, been desperate. Desperate enough to part the fabric of chaos, to open a way into an alien, remote realm; to then lure a curious god of that realm closer, ever closer to the trap they had prepared. The summoners sought power.

All to destroy one man.

The Elder God had crossed the ruined continent, had looked upon the still-living flesh of the Fallen God, had seen the unearthly maggots that crawled forth from that rotting, endlessly pulsing meat and broken bone. Had seen what those maggots flowered into. Even now, as he reached the battered shoreline of Jacuruku, the ancient sister continent to Korelri, they wheeled above him on their broad, black wings. Sensing the power within him, they were hungry for its taste.

But a strong god could ignore the scavengers that trailed in his wake, and K'rul was a strong god. Temples had been raised in his name. Blood had for generations soaked countless altars in worship of him. The nascent cities were wreathed in the smoke of forges, pyres, the red glow of humanity's dawn. The First Empire had risen, on a continent half a world away from where K'rul now walked. An empire of humans, born from the legacy of the T'lan Imass, from whom it took its name.

But it had not been alone for long. Here, on Jacuruku, in the shadow of long-dead K'Chain Che'Malle ruins, another

empire had emerged. Brutal, a devourer of souls, its ruler was a warrior without equal.

K'rul had come to destroy him, had come to snap the chains of twelve million slaves – even the Jaghut Tyrants had not commanded such heartless mastery over their subjects. No, it took a mortal human to achieve this level of tyranny over his kin.

Two other Elder Gods were converging on the Kallorian Empire. The decision had been made. The three – last of the Elder – would bring to a close the High King's despotic rule. K'rul could sense his companions. Both were close; both had been comrades once, but they all – K'rul included – had changed, had drifted far apart. This would mark the first conjoining in millennia.

He could sense a fourth presence as well, a savage, ancient beast following his spoor. A beast of the earth, of winter's frozen breath, a beast with white fur bloodied, wounded almost unto death by the Fall. A beast with but one surviving eye to look upon the destroyed land that had once been its home – long before the empire's rise. Trailing, but coming no closer. And, K'rul well knew, it would remain a distant observer of all that was about to occur. The Elder god could spare it no sorrow, yet was not indifferent to its pain.

We each survive as we must, and when time comes to die, we find our places of solitude ...

The Kallorian Empire had spread to every shoreline of Jacuruku, yet K'rul saw no-one as he took his first steps inland. Lifeless wastes stretched on all sides. The air was grey with ash and dust, the skies overhead churning like lead in a smith's cauldron. The Elder God experienced the first breath of unease, sidling chill across his soul.

Above him the god-spawned scavengers cackled as they wheeled.

A familiar voice spoke in K'rul's mind. *Brother, I am upon the north shore.*

'And I the west.'

Are you troubled?

'I am. All is ... dead.'

Incinerated. The heat remains deep beneath the beds of ash. Ash ... and bone.

A third voice spoke. *Brothers, I am come from the south, where once dwelt the cities. All destroyed. The echoes of a continent's death-cry still linger. Are we deceived? Is this illusion?*

K'rul addressed the first Elder who had spoken in his mind. 'Draconus, I too feel that death-cry. Such pain ... indeed, more dreadful in its aspect than that of the Fallen One. If not a deception as our sister suggests, what has he done?'

We have stepped onto this land, and so all share what you sense, K'rul, Draconus replied. *I, too, am not certain of its truth. Sister, do you approach the High King's abode?*

The third voice replied, *I do, brother Draconus. Would you and brother K'rul join me now, that we may confront this mortal as one?*

'We shall.'

Warrens opened, one to the far north, the other directly before K'rul.

The two Elder Gods joined their sister upon a ragged hilltop where wind swirled through the ashes, spinning funereal wreaths skyward. Directly before them, on a heap of burnt bones, was a throne.

The man seated upon it was smiling. 'As you can see,' he rasped after a moment of scornful regard, 'I have ... prepared for your arrival. Oh yes, I knew you were coming. Draconus, of Tiam's kin. K'rul, Opener of the Paths.' His grey eyes swung to the third Elder. 'And *you*. My dear, I was under the impression that you had abandoned your ... old self. Walking among the mortals, playing the role of middling sorceress - such a deadly risk, though perhaps this is what entices you so to the mortal game. You've stood