

STELLA GEMMELL

Bestselling author of *The City*



THE IMMORTAL THRONE

A NOVEL OF THE CITY

ABOUT THE BOOK

It was an uprising characterized by blood and defined by betrayal . . .

The fervent hope of the victorious rebels, and all who survived the fight to liberate the City from tyranny, is that the accession of Archmage to the imperial throne will usher in an era of peace and stability, of forgiveness and renewal.

If only that were so.

As the City struggles to return to something resembling normal life after the devastation wrought by the rebellion, word arises of a massive army gathering far to the north. No one knows where it has come from, or who leads it, but it becomes apparent that its sole purpose is to destroy the City and annihilate all - man, woman and child - who live within its battered walls.

And while its warriors go forth to fight and die on the battlefield in defence of their homeland and all that they hold dear, so ancient rivalries and bitter family feuds, political and personal betrayals, madness and murder surface within the palaces and corridors of power.

The City is under siege . . . from both without and within.

In her epic new novel, Stella Gemmill brings the astonishing story of the City to a spectacular climax and confirms her place as a master of the fantasy genre.

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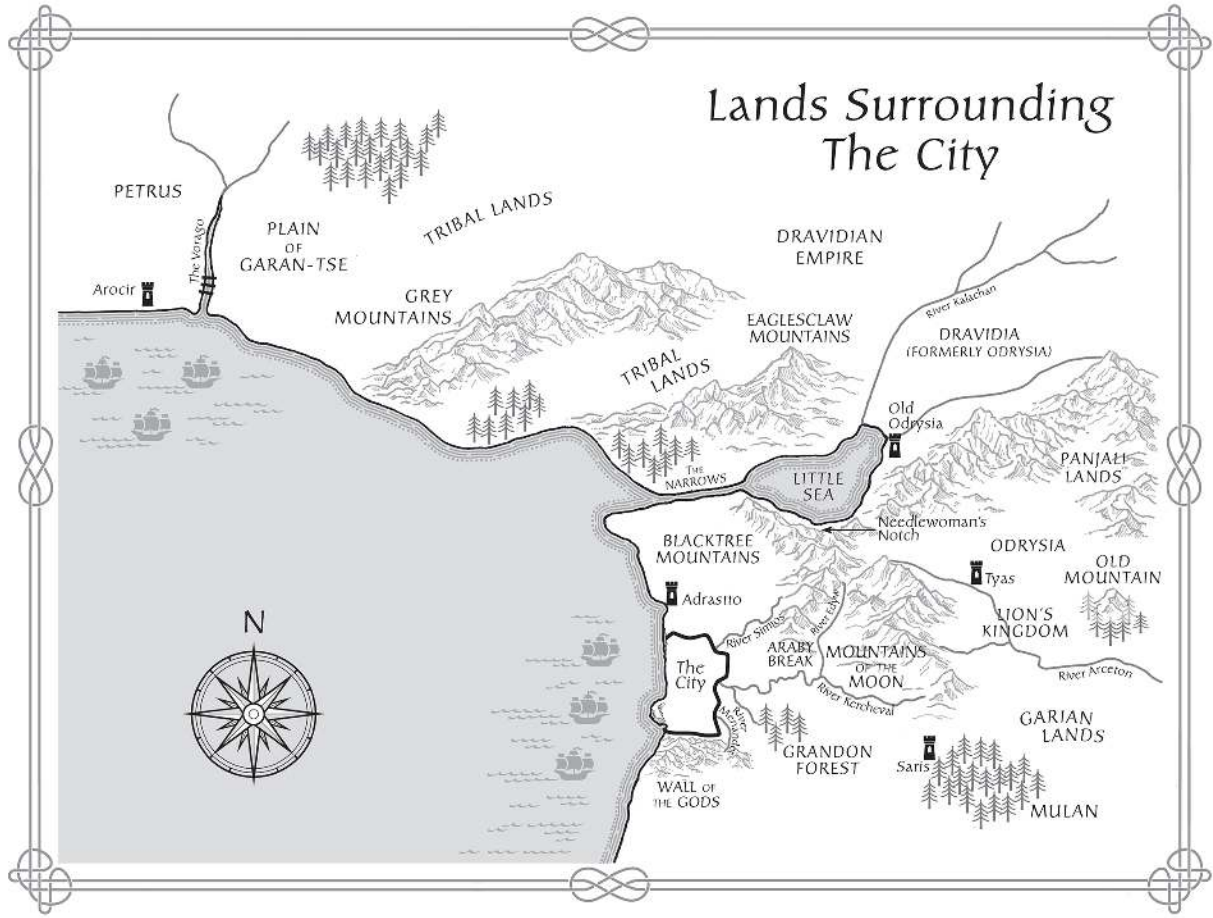
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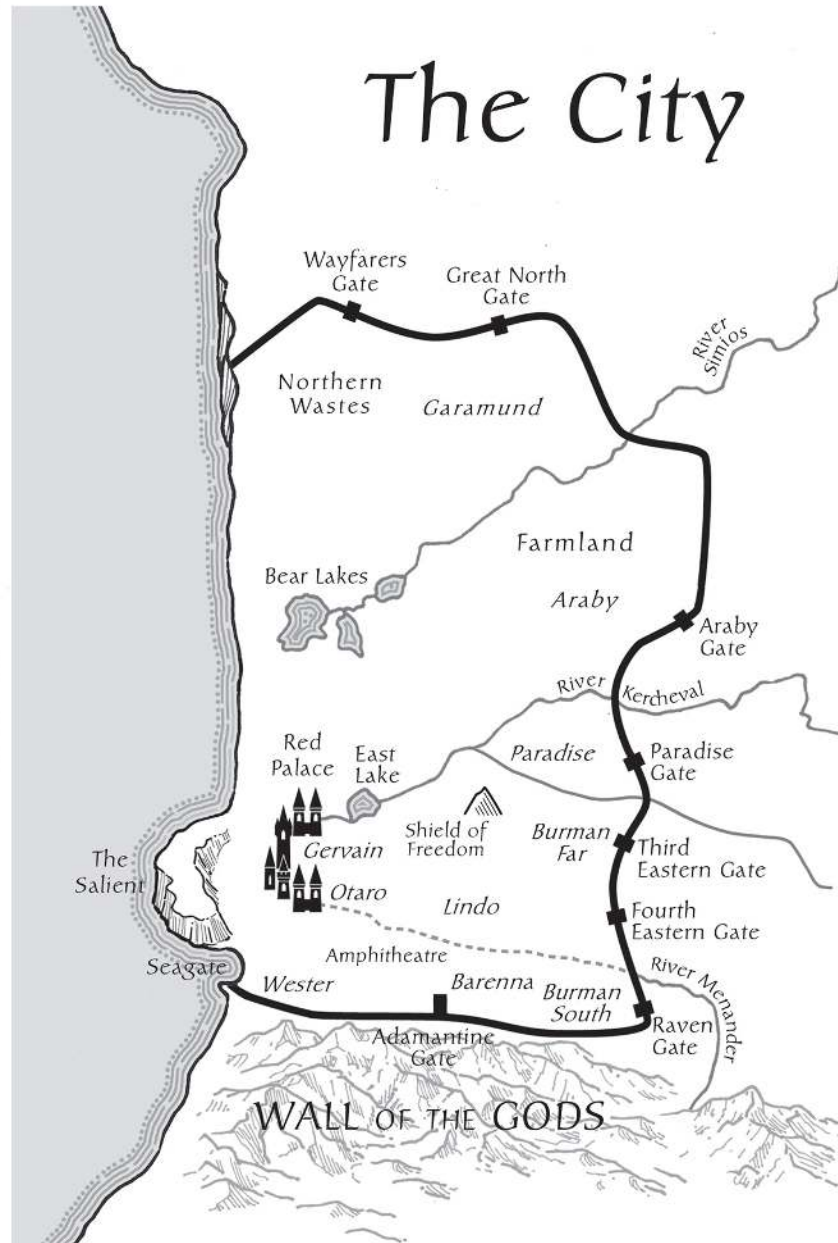
THE IMMORTAL THRONE

Stella Gemmell

Lands Surrounding The City



The City



WALL OF THE GODS

----- Subterranean route of River Menander

PROLOGUE

‘NO, BOY! NOT like that!’

The old man snatched the sword from Rubin’s hand and smacked him with the flat of it. ‘No, you young fool!’ he cried. ‘Look to your sister!’

Rubbing his shoulder, Rubin turned to Indaro who, unmoved by the weapons master’s fury, demonstrated the advance lunge with power and grace. Holding the stance, she was still as a statue, light as a leaf, firm as a rock. She smiled at her brother without conceit.

Suddenly dispirited, Rubin announced, ‘I can’t do this any more.’ He felt no envy of Indaro. He adored her and was in awe of her skill. Yet although he was the younger by two years he knew he would never, even if he practised daily and lived to make old bones, make a master swordsman – or even a competent one.

Neither his sister nor weapons master Gillard moved to stop him as Rubin bounded up the steps of the sunken garden where they practised on summer days. At the top he was struck again by the chill wind off the sea. The Guillaume house, grey and four-square, stood atop the Salient, the rocky cliff piled high between the City and the sea, and it was always windy there. Rubin looked up at the house and was surprised to see their father framed in his high study window looking down at him. But then, *He’s not watching me*, Rubin realized bleakly, *he’s watching Indaro*.

On a whim he ran inside, along grey stone corridors, racing three at a time up the stairs to his father’s study.

Outside the door he skidded to a halt.

Rubin was not frightened of his father – it would be four years yet before he learned the proper meaning of fear – but he did find the man daunting. He seldom saw him, still less spoke to him, but whenever he did there seemed no bond between them, no more than existed between Reeve Kerr Guillaume and one of his servants. Rubin knocked on the door.

‘Come in.’

His father still stood at the window.

‘I don’t want any more fencing lessons,’ Rubin blurted to his back.

Reeve turned slowly, his long, ascetic face calm, as ever.

‘As you wish.’

‘I know I’m only twelve and it’ll be four years before I join the emperor’s army and I could improve in that time,’ the boy went on, making an argument for his father, for it seemed Reeve would not. ‘But . . .’ he hesitated.

‘But there is little call for fencing skills in the infantry,’ his father offered.

‘Yes,’ Rubin went on, encouraged. ‘And I think I’m holding Indaro back.’

Reeve frowned. ‘Now you are lying,’ he replied, but he did not sound angry with his son, or even interested.

‘Indaro will not suffer for watching you stumble and fall at something she is so very good at. And you know it. You are overstating your case, boy, a case you have already won.’

Rubin shifted from foot to foot. His father regarded him with hooded eyes, impassive. In a bid to please him, Rubin said, ‘Indaro will be the greatest swordswoman in the City!’

‘She already is. By the time she is sixteen she will be able to take on the best of swordsmen too. She is magnificent.’

The word hung in the air as his father sat down at his desk and bent to his work, a clear signal for Rubin to leave. But the boy loitered, gazing at the book-lined walls, wondering why any one man would need so many books.

'You won't punish Gillard, will you?'

'Whatever for?' Reeve asked, looking up.

'For striking me.'

'He's a weapons master. What do you expect?' Reeve added, 'Perhaps he hoped you would defend yourself.'

Rubin still lingered, but now he had a chance to talk to his father he struggled for something to say. The silence was broken only by the scritch-scratch of quill on thick vellum.

Finally he asked, 'Is the emperor really immortal?' This was something the boys he was tutored with talked about. The others believed the emperor would live for ever, *had* lived for ever, but Rubin argued that everything dies, even the stars, in the end.

His father did not answer for a few moments, and Rubin thought he was going to ignore the question, but at last Reeve lifted his head again and said, 'No. It is a title. He is a man like me and, like me, he will die one day.'

'Then who will be emperor?'

'Marcellus, the First Lord.'

'Why? He is not the emperor's son. The emperor is of the Family Sarkoy. Marcellus is a Vincerus.' Rubin was proud of his knowledge of the City's noble Families.

Reeve regarded him, his black eyes thoughtful. Perhaps he was in reflective mood, for his focus shifted past Rubin, through the grey stone walls and far beyond the cliffs of the Salient. He nodded to himself, a decision made.

'When the Serafim first came here . . .' he began. Rubin did not know what the Serafim were, not then, but he dared not interrupt this unlooked-for communication, '. . . there were many of them, but over time most died or travelled away, perhaps returning from whence they came. There was only a handful left of the original team and this world was harsh and perilous. Their leader Araeon decided, and the rest agreed at the time, that Marcellus should succeed him should he die. They had all been through a great deal,

you see, and it was always Araeon who kept them together, kept them strong, kept them alive.'

'Did he have no sons of his own?'

'No. But a great deal changed over the long years. There were quarrels, and worse, between the Serafim, and in time some argued fiercely against Marcellus inheriting. One of them, Hammarskjald, tried to kill Araeon and wrest power. He was branded a criminal and banished from the City. Later it was rumoured he had been murdered on Araeon's orders, murdered and his body burned. Then as the City became richer and stronger Araeon started calling himself emperor, the Immortal, and stopped listening to what anyone else said. Other Serafim, including the woman who had once been his wife, conspired against him. But Araeon was wily and his reach was long and in time most of the plotters were executed or exiled. And through it all only Marcellus remained loyal, despite everything.

'Loyalty is the most important virtue of all, boy,' Reeve said, focusing on his son again, 'but you must choose the recipient of it with care. I have admired Marcellus' faithfulness down the years, although I think he has been wrong in almost everything else.

'And now there are just three of them left - three of the First. Araeon, Marcellus, Archange. There are other Serafim, myself included, descendants of the First who form the seven noble Families of the City.'

Sarkoy, Vincerus, Khan and Kerr, Gaeta, Guillaume, Broglanh, thought Rubin. *Every child knows these names.*

'But,' his father went on, 'these three are by far the most powerful. And no one else is like them. So they are wedded to each other in a way no others can be. And when Araeon dies, for he is the oldest, then Marcellus will be his successor.'

Reeve looked troubled as he stared towards the City, as if sensing coming danger. 'This is not the subject for conversation on a pleasant summer's day,' he commented,

and as he spoke the sky started to darken and within moments thunderheads began rolling in from the west. The air in the study cooled and Rubin shivered.

‘When you leave this place to join the army, where I pray you will use intelligence and speed and courage to keep you alive, and not your fighting skills . . .’ His father paused and Rubin saw a rare glint of amusement in his eye. ‘. . . I advise you to stay away from people of power. The armies of the Immortal are filled with generals who don’t know a broadsword from a battle axe, and the murky corridors of the Red Palace are peopled by men, and women, whose only thought is how to stab others in the back whilst protecting their own.’

He lowered his voice. ‘This is treasonous talk, Rubin, and you will not repeat it beyond these four walls. Even to your sister. Araeon is very old, older than the City itself, and is far gone into madness. But he stalks the corridors in many guises and his power is still far-reaching. His physical and moral corruption affects everyone who passes through the Red Palace.’

He paused and Rubin was captive in his father’s dark gaze. ‘Marcellus has always stood at his right hand and when he takes the throne people will smile and say Marcellus will be a benevolent emperor, but it is a long time since Marcellus was benevolent. He is arrogant and ruthless and he loves power and the uses of power. But,’ Reeve sat back in his chair, ‘he will end this war, I believe, and for that reason only I will be glad to see him succeed to the Immortal Throne.’

‘He will conquer the Blues?’

Reeve smiled thinly. ‘No, he cannot conquer the Blues, as you and your young friends call them. We have been at war with this alliance of Petrassi, Odrysians, Fkeni and dozens of neighbouring tribes for more than a century. We have exhausted our resources in the war, as they also have, but

now the City is beleaguered as never before. You know of the blockade, boy?’

Rubin nodded. From high on the Salient you could just make out the enemy ships in the distant south guarding the Seagate, the main harbour of the City, and others in the north at the entrance to the Narrows.

‘The enemy is not at our gates,’ Reeve explained, ‘not fighting beneath our walls, not yet, but the lands all around the City are a desert, where nothing grows and only battling armies flourish.’

He thought for a while. ‘No, Marcellus will not conquer the Blues. The First Lord is a pragmatist and he has travelled far and wide while Araeon has been prowling the Red Palace. He will forge alliances, beguile enemy leaders with his charm, which is considerable, and negotiate the war’s end.’ He shook his head. ‘The City cannot endure war for many more years.’

He bent to his desk again, writing quickly as if fired by his own words. Rubin wandered round the room and looked out of the window where rain was starting to spit and spat on the glass. He thought about what he had heard.

‘What about the emperor’s wife? Is she still alive?’

When Reeve lifted his head again the boy saw his eyes were troubled. ‘Archange has not been his wife for a very long time. Indeed, she left the City rather than exist in it with him. But I’ve heard rumours that she has returned and that cannot be a good thing.’

‘Why?’

‘Because Archange is perhaps the most dangerous of them all.’

PART ONE

The Third Messenger

CHAPTER ONE

THE EMPEROR EAGLE makes its eyrie in the heights of the mountains, far from the haunts of man. Though built of blood and sinew, bone and claw, like the smallest dunghill scavenger, its effortless command of the sky and all-seeing eye make it a potent symbol, in the minds of her warriors, of the mastery and might of the City.

It was not always so. For centuries the phoenix held that emblematic role, watching over the rise of the City and its fall by, variously, earthquake, war, social collapse and once, aptly, by fire. But when the emperor called Saduccuss demanded that one be captured and brought to the Red Palace for display, its mythological status proved a drawback. Saduccuss, thwarted, then decreed that the tufted pea-duck, a dramatically beautiful but stupid creature, given to panic, replace the phoenix as the City's symbol. One was netted and brought to the palace where it hid pitifully in corners, losing its feathers and its beauty until it was mercifully despatched by one of the imperial gulons.

And it was then that the emperor eagle, formerly the crimson eagle, was promoted to City symbol, having the benefit of aloofness without the disadvantage of being non-existent.

One such bird, soaring on air currents far above the topmost peaks of the Blacktree Mountains, might have looked down and wondered what the City's soldiers were doing so high in these crags at dead of winter. Time was

when armies packed away their weapons and armour as the chilly weather closed in, retreating homeward like the silver bears which return to their habitual caverns at first frost to doze away the long days of ice.

Had the emperor eagle been interested, or able, to discriminate between the uniforms of the City warriors and those of their enemy, it might have thought the City embattled. True, its force was the smaller one, but it blocked the entrance to a deep, rocky valley which protected the enemy Blues – an allied army of Odrysians and Buldekki. And the City soldiers were well armed and better provisioned, whereas the Blues had been too long in the field, were short of supplies, low on weapons, far from aid.

And on this particular day, less than a year before the Fall of the City to flood and invasion, one company of Odrysians, cut off from their main army, was in a desperate plight.

The dead woman wouldn't keep quiet.

Jan Vandervarr pulled his felt cap low over his ears in a vain bid to block out her feeble cries. He was perched on a bare rocky ledge, scoured by icy wind, overlooking a mute, snow-covered valley which two days before had been a battlefield.

All the other corpses, hundreds of them, had disappeared under falls of snow and were pristine white mounds, gentle on the softened land. But the woman warmed the snow with her dying body and her uniform was a splash of black, spilled ink on white. And she moved from time to time, valiantly trying to crawl back to her lines, though she did not know the way. She would remain silent for hours, and Jan would hope she was dead, then she would moan again, or chant some City ritual. Jan wished he had the courage to descend and send her to her death gods. But he feared the long range of the heavy crossbows on the far slopes of the valley where City bowmen watched and waited.

He heard a scuffle behind him as someone emerged from the cave-mouth, and smelled the acrid odour of thick smoke and unwashed bodies pouring out on the expelled air. He and his comrades of the Odrysian Seventeenth infantry had been pinned down in this too-small cave for two nights and there was no sign they would be escaping soon. He was glad to do guard duty, to get away from the sounds and stench of forty trapped, discontented men. And there was nothing really to guard against. Nothing was moving in this silent land, except the dead woman.

‘Someone should go down and finish her,’ his friend Franken said, squatting beside him. The smell of smoke rolled off him.

‘You go,’ Jan replied.

It was a conversation they had had before.

‘Rats deserve everything that’s coming to them,’ Franken opined.

The dunghill Rats – as the Odrysians called the City fighters – had come down on them before dusk as they trudged along the valley on their way back to the main body of their army. The skirmish had lost them a hundred or more. With darkness thickening around them they had retreated up to these caves to lick their wounds, ready to break out and hit back at the City the next day. But that night had brought heavy snowfall and the temperature had dropped like a stone. Dawn the next day had revealed a valley bright with whiteness, muffled and still.

‘City sorcery,’ Franken offered, sucking his teeth and spitting in the snow.

He was still talking about the woman. Jan made no reply.

Franken glanced at him. ‘I wouldn’t be a Rat.’

It was a common subject for discussion among the allied forces. They all knew Rats were hard to kill. They didn’t know why, though there was much superstitious talk about their emperor, whom the City fighters called the Immortal, and his magics. But whatever the reason, and Jan

Vandervarr didn't much care what it was, it made City warriors formidable enemies. Even the women. No one wanted to die - and yet if you had a mortal wound you prayed for a quick death or the salvation of a comrade's merciful blade. No one wanted to die like this woman, lost in the snow.

Jan sighed. His years in the Odrysian army had shown him there were no easy deaths, no easy answers. A vision of his wife Peg, dead these ten years, flashed before his eyes. He pushed it away ruthlessly. That life was long gone. This was his life now.

There was another blast of warm, noisome air from the cave-mouth, and a third soldier squatted on the ledge beside them. Jan glanced at him. It was the red-haired officer who had joined them in the autumn from a company destroyed by the City's Maritime army at Copperburn. The newcomer was young and tall and very thin, with legs like a crane's, and his fiery hair was pulled back in a wiry bunch behind his head. Jan grinned to himself. The three of them perched in a row looked like gargoyles he'd seen on the imperial palace in Old Odrysia, now lost to the Dravidian Empire.

Faint sounds drifted up from the snowy valley.

'Someone should go down and finish her,' Franken commented to the new man pointedly.

The officer nodded his agreement then stood and stepped off the ledge into the deep snow. His skinny shanks sank into the icy crust and he nearly lost his balance.

'What are you doing?' Franken asked with alarm, grabbing the redhead's shoulder to keep him upright.

'Going down to despatch her, as you suggest,' the young officer replied, regaining his balance and taking another step.

'They'll despatch *you* before you get to her,' Franken told him, pointing to the rocky crags across the valley. 'Those bolts of theirs will skewer you like pork.'

The officer looked back and smiled. Jan saw he had the strangest violet-coloured eyes.

‘No they won’t,’ he told Franken. ‘They’ll wait until I’m on my way back.’

Then he plunged forward and started forging his way through the hip-deep snow, moving his arms as if paddling a boat. It was slow going and twice he fell over, but he struggled to his feet and pressed on. As his dark figure dwindled Jan expected him to go down at any moment, felled by a crossbow bolt, but he trudged on until he reached the woman and there he stood, leaning above her like a wading bird, taking his time.

‘What’s he up to?’ Franken asked, squinting, as if Jan might have better information than he. ‘He’s talking to her.’ Then he added, ‘Man’s a fool.’

Women warriors make fools of us all, Jan thought. The Odrysians all despised the Rats, or claimed to, for including women in their ranks, but no one hesitated to kill them along with the men they stood with. In a good honest hand-to-hand battle the women were easier to kill, mutilate or disarm. But most fighting was in the scramble of a skirmish, at night, or in bad weather, or on tough terrain, and the women were often faster, presented a smaller target, and were lower to the ground, better balanced. Many of his dead comrades had learned that the hard way when hesitating to despatch a woman. Jan had no trouble killing them now, and he had learned to fear them just as much as their menfolk.

‘He’s coming back,’ Franken announced, his finger, as always, on the pulse of the obvious.

Jan watched as the officer presented his back to the enemy and started plodding back up the treacherous hillside towards them.

‘They’ll take him now,’ Franken said confidently, but still the young man came on, unskewered, until he was out of crossbow range and scrambling up the steep incline

beneath the ledge. Jan and Franken offered a hand each and pulled. The officer's boots slid on the icy shelf, then he was beside them again. He stamped the snow off his legs and turned back towards the cave.

'Is she dead?' Jan asked him.

The young man nodded.

'What were you talking to her about?' Franken asked. But the officer moved back towards the cave-mouth, offering no reply.

'Well, what did she say?' Franken asked his back.

The officer hesitated and turned for a moment.

'She said, "Marcellus is coming."'

The red-headed officer, whom the Odrysians knew as Adolfus but whose real name was Rubin Kerr Guillaume, pushed aside the heavy groundsheet which screened the men from the worst of the cold, then ducked his head and with a sniff of distaste entered the reeking cave. There were two fires, one for the officers, one for the men, but they were poor weak things, fuelled by damp brush and twigs, pouring out more smoke than heat. The smoke lay in a thick layer in the roof of the cave. It was impossible to see through, impossible to breathe, and Rubin hurried, doubled up, stepping over injured soldiers to his billet where he sat down against the rock wall and took a cautious breath. Several junior officers watched him sourly. He was not a popular man, he knew, and if they wondered what he'd been up to they didn't ask.

Rubin, under direct orders from the City's First Lord Marcellus Vincerus, had infiltrated the Odrysian company after the Battle of Copperburn, where the City's veteran Maritime had crushed an alliance of Blues in a three-day battle of unparalleled awfulness. Rubin's command of the Odrysian tongue was pitch-perfect, and he had previously spent two years in their country, long enough to convince the keenest of inquisitors that he was a native. No, the

other junior officers didn't dislike him because they suspected him of being a spy. They disliked him because they suspected him of being an arrogant, opinionated dilettante. Which was at least partly true, and which was just the way Rubin liked it.

He rummaged in his pack, pulling out some crusty old bread and leathery meat. He sniffed the meat, decided it would last a day or so more, and chewed on the bread, which wouldn't.

A dark figure emerged from the smoke, coughing.
'General wants you.'

Rubin sighed. In the scramble to find shelter after the battle two days before he had stuck closely to the senior officers and found himself in the same cave as the general. He liked to stay near the centre of things. But now it meant having to explain himself, something he didn't care for. He stood and ducked under the smoke again to where Arben Busch was encamped.

Rubin loomed awkwardly over him until the general glanced up and gestured him to sit. Busch was dark-faced and bad-tempered, but he had the reputation of a brilliant strategist, a reputation Rubin was starting to doubt now they were a hundred-odd men trapped in caves at dead of winter.

'Did you kill her?' the general asked him.

'Yes, sir.'

'Why?'

'She was affecting the men's morale, sir.'

Busch sighed, deeply pouched eyes red and weary.

'Did it occur to you that if she was affecting *our* morale she was affecting the enemy still more?'

'No it didn't, sir,' Rubin said straight-faced.

Busch snorted. 'Did you question her? What did she say?'

'She said Marcellus would come and destroy us all.'

'Marcellus is fighting in the south,' put in another officer, a loudmouthed know-nothing called Camben.

‘As far as we know,’ added the general thoughtfully. Then he shook his head. ‘Just words,’ he concluded. ‘She wields Marcellus like a bogeyman to frighten us with.’

Rubin told him: ‘She was blind. She thought I was a comrade.’

‘You speak the City tongue?’ asked Camben suspiciously, glancing at his general to see if he was impressed by this keen deduction.

‘Of course,’ Rubin replied. ‘Know your enemy and his ways. Don’t you?’ he asked in mock surprise.

‘I don’t succour the enemy,’ replied Camben, reddening.

‘Gentlemen,’ Busch snapped. ‘How is the terrain?’ he asked.

‘Hopeless,’ Rubin told him. ‘The snow is still waist-deep in parts. Crossing the valley would take half a day. They could pick us all off at their leisure with those hefty crossbows of theirs.’

‘We don’t even know if the City crossbowmen are still there,’ argued Camben. ‘We haven’t seen them for more than a day.’

‘They’re still there,’ said Rubin.

Camben scowled at him, but Busch asked, ‘How are you so sure?’

Rubin shrugged and flashed a smile, which was wasted on the dour general. ‘I could feel their eyes on me,’ he lied.

‘You can take guard duty tonight.’ The general cocked his head towards the cave-mouth, dismissing him.

As Rubin turned away new arrivals covered with fresh snow came in from the cold, stamping their feet, shaking themselves like wet dogs. Officers from the other caves were gathering, and Rubin would be stuck outside unable to hear what was going on. He returned to his pack, took out a thick wool scarf and a thin blanket, swallowed the last piece of bread, then went out into the icy air.

It was snowing hard now and he could see nothing but a moving white wall a few paces in front of him. It was

blowing away from the cave-mouth, though, and Vandervarr and Franken had erected a small awning in the lee of a rocky outcrop. They looked quite cosy, and Rubin joined them.

‘Punishment?’ Vandervarr asked in his friendly way.

Rubin smiled briefly and nodded.

‘Perhaps I can go back inside then,’ Franken suggested hopefully.

Vandervarr grimaced. ‘We may as well all go in. We’re doing no bloody good out here.’

It was true. The entire City army could walk up to them and they wouldn’t see it until it was a sword’s length away. Rubin scrambled back until his spine was against the rock wall, then he wrapped the scarf round his head and the blanket round his shoulders. As an afterthought he pulled out his long-bladed knife and positioned it on the ground near his left hand.

‘That’s a pigsticker,’ Franken commented.

‘My father’s,’ Rubin replied and the two others nodded in satisfaction. This was what they expected to hear.

‘Where are you from?’ Jan Vandervarr asked.

‘Parabel,’ Rubin said, pulling out a familiar story from his mind’s backpack of handy tales. ‘Upper Heights. My father owned an inn there.’ The mere mention of a tavern made a fighting man feel at ease, he’d discovered. ‘Before the Great Catastrophe,’ he added. Reference to the destruction of the winter palace and the execution of the Odrysian royal family created a bond of loss.

Franken snorted. ‘You’re a rich boy, then.’

Rubin shrugged. ‘I bleed and die for my country like any man,’ he said piously.

‘Terrible old boots, though,’ Franken added, staring at them.

‘I’ve marched a long way in these boots.’

Franken snorted in derision. ‘You’re not old enough to have marched a long way in *any* boots.’

You've no idea what I've done, fat man, Rubin thought. But he smiled amiably.

'Married?' Jan Vandervarr asked.

Rubin could have laughed. But he shook his head as if with deep regret. 'You?'

He listened as Jan told an age-old tale of a wife slaughtered, children lost, then the three of them swapped stories of the evils of the City. Franken was a blowhard, but Rubin liked Jan, his quiet way of listening and considering. When Rubin told him a largely true story about his family's suffering at the hands of the City Rats - true in that it had happened, although not to him - the older man nodded sympathetically, and said quietly, 'Life's a funny old dog.'

As they talked the falling snow thickened and they were warmed by their companionship. Rubin found himself growing sleepy, yet it was barely starting to get dark. It was going to be a long night.

The war between the City and the allied forces City warriors called Blueskins had been going on for more than a century, fuelled, his lord Marcellus had told him, by greed and envy. The two mightiest enemies were the Odrysians and the Petrassi, whose territory abutted that of the City, but they were aided by many nations and tribes and opportunist bands of criminals from encircling lands. Here in the Blacktree Mountains an Odrysian army and hundreds of Buldekki tribesmen were holding a vital pass to the north, and the City's Fifth Imperial infantry were fighting to wrest it from them.

The fat man Franken was telling an elderly joke about a farmer, his goat and a magician's daughter when Rubin heard the subtle scrape of swords stealthily drawn. He grabbed his knife and leaped up as a dozen dark figures loomed out of the flying snow, armoured and armed with bright blades. Fear clutched his chest as he saw they were clad in the black and silver of the City's elite warriors, the Thousand.

'I am a friend!' he cried in the City tongue, raising his hands in surrender. 'My name is Rubin Kerr Guillaume!' As the silent warriors paused, swords raised, he bent and dug in the hidden pocket in his boot. He pulled out his gold insignia.

'See! I am a loyal man of the City! This was given to me by Marcellus himself!'

The leader snatched the gold square and pocketed it, then he gestured to Jan and Franken who were still frozen in place, white-faced, using hope to fend off the enemy swords.

'Prove it,' the leader said, his voice muffled under his full-faced helm.

Rubin stepped behind Franken, pulled his head back and sliced the man's throat; then as the blood sprayed he turned to Jan Vandervarr. In the instant before he pierced him in the heart, he thought he saw relief in the older man's eyes.

Life's a funny old dog, Jan.

The leader of the City soldiers nodded then cuffed Rubin across the side of the head with a heavy gauntlet. 'Bind him. Don't kill him,' Rubin heard him say as he fell dazed to the snowy ground.

In the time that followed he fell in and out of consciousness as he was shackled then dragged and manhandled up and down icy slopes to an unknown destination, sliding helplessly at times, kicked and pushed and pulled like a carcass. His two captors had been told to keep him alive, but beyond that their only interest was getting him off their hands as fast as possible. At last they reached an encampment and Rubin was shoved into a large tent among piles of provisions and armour. He fell to his knees. There was snow on the ground and it was cold as a widow's tit in there. Knowing he'd die if left bound and helpless, Rubin appealed to his guards, who were retreating, laughing and talking.

'I'll be dead within the hour if you leave me here!'

They paused and looked at each other, then left. But a short while later one returned with two blankets which he threw at Rubin. The young man stood with difficulty and pushed together two crates. He laid one blanket over them, then wrapped himself in the other and lay down. He fell asleep on the instant.

He was four years old and in his father's house on the Salient, sitting at table one sunny morning, awaiting breakfast. The little boy was always asked if he wanted one boiled egg or two. He would tell the servant one, then ask for another when he had finished the first. He sat, spoon at the ready, but no eggs appeared and no servant came to ask what he wanted. After a while he slid off his stool and trotted into the kitchens. The place was in ferment, cooks and servants, some of whom he'd never seen before, racing about shouting at each other. When his friend Dorcas, the youngest maid, spotted him she hurried over and picked him up and settled him on her hip.

'Where's my breakfast?' whined little Rubin, pulling at Dorcas' fair braids.

'Be a good boy. Sit at the table and I'll bring your eggs.'

'Where's Mama?' The boy was suddenly anxious about all the strangeness in the house. He was used to a calm, ordered routine.

'Your mother's busy. Eat your breakfast first, then we'll go and find her.'

He'd barely had time to eat his first egg when his mother came in, looking excited and pleased. She picked him up and held him close. Rubin could smell perfume which made his nose itch, and soap and, more faintly, horses.

'You must be a good boy today. This is an important day for all of us. Marcellus Vincerus is coming to visit Papa.'

'Who is he? Can I see him?'

'He is the First Lord of the City, and our greatest hero. You must be very good and stay with Dorcas and do as she tells you.'

'Where's Indaro?' He craned his neck around.

'She's at her lessons. She's being a good girl.'

All day long the boy heard whispered talk of the great lord Marcellus and, excited beyond endurance, he nagged Dorcas until the harassed girl agreed they could watch for the visitor from a first-floor balcony. They waited, as the rest of the house waited, in a state of suspended frenzy.

As night fell the sound of many hoofbeats echoed from the distance and a group of twenty or more riders broke out from the gloom. Rubin, dozing in Dorcas' lap, threw off his tiredness and craned his neck to see past the stone balusters.

'Which one is he?' he asked the maid, disappointed that the newcomers looked like the family's troopers he saw every day. They were mostly bearded, a few clean-shaven, all wearing dark riding clothes. As they dismounted they talked cheerfully, their voices ringing in the chill air.

Impatiently Rubin pushed his head between the balusters. "Scuse me," he cried out in a loud whisper.

The closest rider looked up and grinned at the small boy. 'Hello,' he said.

'Are you Marcellus?' Rubin asked him.

The rider shook his head gravely. 'No, lad. That is the First Lord.' He pointed to one of the group but Rubin could not make out which.

'Who?' he whispered shrilly.

One man walked forward. 'I am Marcellus,' he said, gazing up. 'What is your name?'

'Rubin,' the boy told him in a small voice, suddenly overcome with shyness.

'Is this your house, Rubin?'

The boy thought about it. 'No, sir, it is my papa's house,' he answered seriously.

'Reeve Kerr Guillaume is your father?'

But he did not understand the question, and shook his head. The sound of the men's laughter rose up to the balcony, and he retreated behind Dorcas' skirts.

Marcellus had fair hair and black eyes and he was taller than most of the riders. He stood stiffly, a result, Rubin later learned, of an old back injury, and he reminded the little boy of a piece in his father's ancient ivory and obsidian chess set. For many years after, whenever Marcellus' name was mentioned Rubin always visualized the black king with the chipped obsidian base, surrounded by his pawns.

Rubin was awoken by loud laughter. Opening his eyes, he found the chilly tent was alive with soldiers, ebullient with success. They'd laid straw mats and rugs on the bare ground and erected tables, and were bringing in folding camp beds and chairs. The delicious smell of roasted meat wafted in on the night air. In the centre of the tent a bay stallion with plaited tail and mane munched noisily from a nosebag. Rubin thought he looked familiar.

He sat up gingerly, hoping nothing was broken.

'Are you injured?' a well-known voice asked.

Rubin looked around. Everyone in the tent was heavily garbed, some still in blood-boltered armour, others in furs and warm wraps. Only one man was lightly dressed in clean shirt and trousers, newly shaved, fresh as a daisy.

Rubin grunted. 'It's hard to tell, under all the pain,' he answered.

Marcellus grinned at him. 'You do turn up in some odd places, young Rubin,' he said.

'The Odrysians thought you were fighting in the south,' Rubin told his lord once they were alone. He was wrapped in a warm wool blanket. He had eaten his fill of roast pig and was swigging from a cup of warmed wine. He felt a little drunk.