



PAUL KEARNEY

THE TEN THOUSAND

"One of the very best writers of fantasy around."

Steven Erikson

The Ten Thousand

The Macht Book 1

Paul Kearney

For John McLaughlin and Charlotte Bruton

Grateful acknowledgements to:

Mark Newton, Christian Dunn, Patrick St Denis, Darren Turpin and James Kearney.

And Marie of course, as always.

PART ONE

ANTIMONE'S PITY

ONE

THE MEANING OF DEFEAT

By the sea, Rictus had been born, and now it was by the sea that he would die.

He had thrown away his shield and sat on a tussock of yellow marram grass, with the cold grey sand between his toes and a blinding white lace of foam from the incoming tide blazing bright as snow in his eyes.

If he lifted his head there was real snow to be seen also, on the shoulders of Mount Panjaeos to the west. Eternal snow, in whose drifts the god Gaenion had his forge, and had hammered out the hearts of stars.

As good a place as any to make an end.

He felt the blood ooze from his side, a slow promise, a sneer. It made him smile. I know that, he thought. I know these things. The point has been made. A spearhead from Gan Burian has made it.

He still had his sword, such as it was, a cheap, soft-iron bargain he'd picked up more out of a sense of decorum than anything else. Like all men, he knew his real weapon was the spear. The sword was for defeat, for the black end when one could no longer deny it.

And he still had a spear, Eight feet tall, the old, dark wood of the shaft scored now with new scars of white. It had been his father's.

My father. Whose home, whose life I have now thrown onto the scales.

Again, he smiled under the heavy helmet of bronze. But it was not a smile. It was the final baring of teeth that the bayed animal must show.

And so they found him, three winded foot-soldiers of Gan Burian who had also cast aside their shields, but to aid pursuit, not flight. These too had their spears, every point bloodied, and in their eyes there was that glaze which comes to men from wine, and sex, and killing. They gave a shout as they sighted him, this bowed figure by the shore of the sea, his tunic bloody at the side. And now they darted a change of course as swiftly as fish in shoal, teeth bared. Happy. As happy as man can be. For what can make man happier than the annihilation of his enemy when all is at risk: his woman, his child, the place he calls a home? The men of Gan Burian had defended their city from attack in a wrenched, bowel-draining fight which had lasted all of the morning. They had won. They had won, and now, how bright the sky seemed, and how good did the fine salt air off the sea taste in their mouths. The sweetest of all dishes. And now, they would savour a little more of it.

Rictus saw them come, their feet raising little surfs of sand as they bounded across the dunes towards him. He stood up, ignoring the pain as he had been taught. He filled his lungs with that good, cold air, that salt, that slake of earth. Closing his eyes, he smiled a third time; for himself. For the memory of the sea, for the smell.

Lord, in thy glory and thy goodness, send worthy men to kill me.

He leaned on the spear a little, digging the spiked butt into the sand, sinking it past the gleam of the bronze. He waited, not even bothering to touch the leather scabbard wherein lay his contemptible little sword. Past his head there broke a black and white formation, a piping squadron of birds. Oyster catchers, frightened off the flats of sand by the men who approached. He was as aware of their wingbeats as he was of the slow pulse in his side. Death's abacus, the beads knocking home ever slower. A moment of

strange bliss, of knowing that all things were the same, or at least could be the same. The drunken clarity of pain, and fearlessness. It was something—it truly was something—not to be afraid, at this moment.

And they were here, right before him. He was startled, as he had not been startled all day, not even when the shield-lines met. He had been prepared for that crash all his life, had expected it, had wanted it to be even grander than it had been. This was different. It was seeing other ordinary men with his murder in their eyes. Not anonymous, but as personal as could be. It shook him a little, and that uncertainty translated into a white-cold flood of adrenaline through each of his nerves. He stood, blinked, forgot the pain and pulse of his life-blood as it trickled out of him. He was the beast at bay, about to snarl at the hunters.

They spread about him; ordinary men who had killed their fellows and found it quite good. A sport almost. They had come uncertain and apprehensive to battle, and had prevailed. With the breaking of their enemy's line they had found themselves heroes, part of what might one day be history. Later they would reform into their phalanxes and would make the light-hearted march to the city of their foes, and would there become conquerors. This—this killing—was no more than a garnish on the dish.

Rictus knew this. He did not hate these men who had come to kill him, as he was quite certain they did not hate him. They did not know that he was an only son, that he loved his father with a fierce, never-to-be-spoken adulation. That he would die to save the least of his family's dogs. They did not know that he loved the sight and smell and sound of the sea as another man might love to let gold coin trickle through his fingers. Rictus was a bronze mask to them. He would die, and they would brag to their children of it.

This is life, the way things work. All these things, Rictus knew. But he had been taught well, so he took his father's spear in both fists and ignored the pain and started thinking about how to kill these smiling men who had come about him.

With a short, yipping yell, the first bounced in to attack, a high-coloured face with a black beard framing it, and eyes as bright as frosted stones. He held his spear at the midpoint of the shaft, and thrust it at Rictus's collarbone.

Rictus had grasped his own weapon at the balance-point, a short arm's length from the butt, and thus had a longer reach. Two-handed, he clapped aside the point of his attacker's spear and then reversed the grip of his own—all in a movement which was as beautiful and fluid as the steps of a dance. As his own spear spun, it made the other two men jump backwards, away from the wicked edge of the aichme, the spearhead. Two-handed again, he lunged with the sauroter, the lizard-sticker they called it, a four-sided spike of bronze which was the aichme's counterweight. It struck the black-bearded man to the left of his nose, punched through the thin bone there for the depth of a handspan before Rictus jerked it out. The man staggered backwards like a drunkard, blinking slowly. His hand came up to his face, and then he sat down hard on the sand as the blood came spurting from the square-sided hole in it, steam rising in the cold air.

Another of the three screamed at this, raised his spear over his shoulder and charged. Rictus had time only to throw himself aside and went sprawling, his spear levered out of his grasp as the aichme plunged in sand. As he got up the third man seemed to rouse himself also, and stumped into the fight unwillingly. He was older, a

greybeard, but there was a black calm about his eyes. He moved in as though thinking about something else.

Rictus rolled as the second man's spear stabbed the sand at his side. He got his arm about it and clamped the spearhead against his injured ribs, the pain scarcely felt. Then he kicked up with both feet and one heel dunted his attacker in the groin. The man's cheeks filled. Rictus came up off the ground at him, climbing up the spear-shaft, and butted him in the face with all the strength left in his torso. The bronze of his helmet rang, and he was glad of it for the first time that day. The man fell full length on his back and coiled feebly in on himself and the red ruin of his face.

A moment of triumph, so brief it would not even be recalled later. Then something seized the horsehair crest of Rictus's helm from behind.

He had forgotten about the third man, had lost him in his brief, bloody map of things.

The crest-box grated against bronze, but the pins held. A foot thumped into the hollow of Rictus's knee. He tumbled backwards, his helm askew so that he was blinded. His feet furrowed the sand uselessly. Someone stood on his chest, and there was a grating noise, metal on metal, as a spearpoint lifted the chin of his helm, slicing open his lower lip as it did so.

The older man, the greybeard. He had hair like a sheep's pelt on his head and his eyes were dark as sloes. He wore the old-fashioned felt tunic of the inner mountains, sleeveless, ending above the knee. His limbs were brown and knotted with blue veins over the bunched muscles. One handed, he raised the aichme of his spear until it rested on Rictus's throat and pricked blood there.

When Rictus swallowed the keen spearpoint etched fire on his throat. He felt the blood flowing more freely from his side now, darkening the sand under him. It was trickling down his chin also. He was leaking at the seams. He breathed out, relaxing. It was done. It was over, and he had done something to make them remember him by. He looked up at the washed-pale blue of the sky, the fading of the year's glory, and the oyster catchers came piping back into it to resume their places on the strand. He followed their flight as far as he could with his eyes.

The older man did also, the spear is steady in his fist as if it had been planted in stone. Behind him, his two companions were thrashing in the sand, struggling and hooting with sounds that seemed barely those made by men. He glanced at them, and there was naked contempt in his face. Then he stabbed his spear in the sand, bent, his foot pushing the air out of Rictus's lungs, and yanked the helm clear off the younger man's head. He looked at him, nodded, then tossed it aside. The sword followed, flicked through the air like a broken child's plaything.

"You lie there," he said. "You try to get up, and I finish you."

Rictus nodded, astonished.

The man poked his finger into the bloody lacerated hole in Rictus's side, and Rictus stiffened, baring blood-slimed teeth. The man grinned, his own teeth square and yellow, like those of a horse. "No air. No bubbles. You will live, maybe." His eyes sharpened, danced like black beads. "Maybe." He see-sawed his bloody hand in the air, then slapped Rictus across the face. A blunt forefinger with a filthy, over-long nail tapped Rictus on the forehead. "Stay here." Then he straightened, using his spear to ease upright again and grimacing, like a man who has been remonstrating with a child.

“Ogio! Demas! Are you men or women? You keen like girls.” He spat.

The hooting noises subsided. The two other men helped each other to their feet and came staggering over, feet dragging in the sand. One of them drew a knife from his belt, a long, wicked, sliver of iron. “I take this one,” he said in a gargled tone that was horrible to hear. He was the one with the hole in his face. It jetted blood with every word as if to lend them emphasis.

“You tried. You failed. He is mine now,” the older man said coldly.

“Remion, you see what he has done to me? I am likely to die now.”

“You will not die, if you keep it clean and don’t stick your fingers in it. I’ve seen men live with worse.” Remion spat again. “Better men than you.”

“Then kill him yourself!”

“I’ll do as I please, you rat’s cunt, whatever you say. Now see to Demas. He needs his nose straightened.”

Some moment had passed, some kind of unspoken compact had been made. There would be no more fighting now. The time which had been—that time of license and slaughter and free-flowing violence—that had gone now, and the normal rules of life which men lived their lives by were slipping back into place. Rictus sat up, feeling it, but hardly able to put the knowledge into rational thought. They would not kill him now, and he would not hurt them either. They were all civilized men again.

The older man, Remion, was cutting strips off the hem of his tunic, but the felt frayed under his knife. He cursed, then swivelled to regard Rictus. “Off with that shirt, boy, I need something to plug this man’s face.”

Rictus hesitated, and in that second the eyes of all three of the other men fastened on him. He drew his tunic over his head, gasping at the pain in his side, and tossed it to Remion. All he had on now were his sandals and a linen breechclout. The wind raised gooseflesh off his limbs. He clamped his elbow to his injured side. The blood was slowing. He spat scarlet into the sand.

Remion ripped the tunic to strips, discarding the blood-soaked part under the armpit. His two companions uttered hoarse, low growling sounds as he saw to their hurts. There was a crack as he levered Demas’s nose back into place, and the man screamed and clouted him on the side of the head. He took it in good part, shoving Demas on his back in the sand and laughing. He slapped Ogio’s hand away from his punctured face and stared intently at the bloody hole, wiping around it.

“When you get back, have the physician stitch that hole closed. What’s behind it will heal in time by itself. For now, let it bleed free; let it bleed the dirt out. A sauroter spike is a filthy thing to have had in you.” He clapped Ogio on the arm, grinning his yellow grin, then rose and padded over to Rictus. In his hand were the rags of the tunic. He tossed them into Rictus’s lap. “Bind yourself up. You’re likely to bleed to death else.”

Rictus looked into his dark eyes. “Why do you not kill me?”

Remion frowned. “Shut your mouth.”

Rictus wondered if he were to die anyway. On the battlefield his wound had seemed a thing of little account. He could still move, run, thrust a spear and behave as a man ought. But now that the bloodied press of the phalanx had been left behind it all seemed so much worse. He looked at the men he had wounded and felt sick at their blood—he who had been around blood and killing all his life.

You want to eat; then something must have its throat wrung, his father had said. Nothing can be had for nothing. When life gives you something, something else must be taken in return. That is the merest logic.

“Why do you not kill me?” Rictus asked again. Bewildered.

The man called Remion glared at him and raised his spear as if to stab. Rictus did not flinch. He was past that, still in the place where his own life did not matter. He looked up with wide eyes. Curiosity, resignation. No fear.

“I had a son,” Remion said at last, his face bunched as tight as his blue-veined bicep. His eyes were black.

They broke the fittings off his father’s spear, leaving an arm’s span of splintered wood, and with this they made a yoke, binding Rictus’s hands before him and then sliding the shaft through that space between spine and elbows. Rictus did not resist. He had been brought up to believe in victory and death. He did not know quite what to make of defeat, and thus stood like a pole-axed ox as they bound him—not with spite—but like tired men who are keen to get home. Hurt men. The blood-smell rose even over the stink of shit on Broken-nose’s thighs.

They picked up the aichme and sauroter. Remi stowed them in the hollow of his tunic. No doubt one day he would burn them out and reset them in virgin wood. Good spear fittings were more valuable than gold. They would see service again. The horsehair-crested helm was claimed by the man with the hole in his face, Ogio. Already, his face was swelling up like an apple, shiny and pink.

Finally, some of Rictus’s numbness gnawed through.

“My father lives in the green glen past—”

“Your father is carrion now, boy,” Remion said. And there was even a kind of pity in his face as he said it.

Rictus twisted, eyes wide, and Broken-nose beat the flat of his spear-shaft into his nape. A white detonation. Rictus fell to his knees, opening one up like liver. “Please,” he said. “Please don’t—”

Again, he was beaten. First the spear-shaft, and then a fist clumping again and again into the top of his spine. A childish punching, fuelled by rage more than the knowledge of where a fist does damage. He rode it out, forehead on the sand, blinking furiously and trying to make his thoughts come in some kind of order.

“The bastard begs!”

I didn’t beg, he thought. At least, not for me. For my father, I will beg. For my father.

He twisted his head, still pounded, and caught Remion’s eye.

“Please.”

Remion understood perfectly. Rictus knew that. In these few, bloody minutes he had come to know the older man well.

No, Remion mouthed. His face was grey. In that instant, Rictus knew that he had seen all this before. Every permutation of this stupid little dance had already printed its steps in the older man’s memory. The dance was as old as Hell itself.

Something else his father had said: *Do not believe that men reveal themselves only in defeat. Victory tugs the veil aside also.*

Goddess of the Veil; bitter, black Antimone, whose real name must never be spoken. Now she smiles. Now she hovers here about these dunes, dark wings flickering.

The black side to life. Pride, hate, fear. Not evil— that is something else. Antimone merely watches what we do to ourselves and each other. Her tears, it is said, water every battlefield, every sundered marriage-bed. She is un-luck, the ruin of life. But only because she is there when it happens.

The deeds, the atrocities—those we do to ourselves.

TWO

A LONG DAY'S TROUBLE

"We are late to the party, my friends," Remion said.

Dusk was coming on, and a bitter wind was beating around the pines on the hillsides. Rictus's arms were numb from the elbow down, and when he looked at his hands he saw they were swollen and blue. He sank to his knees, unable to look at the valley below.

Broken-nose yanked his head up by the hair. "Watch this, boy. See what happens when you go about starting wars. This is how it ends."

There was a city in the valley, a long, low cluster of stone-built houses with clay-tiled roofs. Rictus had made tiles like that on his father's farm. One shaped the mud upon the top of one's thigh.

For perhaps two pasangs, the streets ran in clumps and ribbons, with a scattering of pine-shadowed lots among them. Here and there the marble of a shrine blinked white. The theatre where Rictus had seen Sarenias performed rose inviolate, head and shoulders above the swallow's-nest alleyways. And surrounding all, the very symbol of the city's integrity, was an undulating stone wall two spear-lengths high. There were three gates visible from this direction alone, and into each ran the brown mud of a road. A hill rose up at one end of this sprawling metropolis, one flank a sheer crag. Upon this a citadel had been built with a pair of tall towers within. There was a gatehouse, black with age, and the gleam of bronze on the ramparts.

And people, people everywhere.

The sound of the city's agony carried up into the hills. A dull roar, a swallowing up of all individual voice, so that it seemed the sound was not made by men and women and children, but was the torment of the city itself. It rose with the smoke, which now began to smart Rictus's eyes. Plumes of black rose in ribands and banners within the circuit of the walls. Crowds clogged the streets, and in the midst of the roar one could now make out the clangour of metal on metal. At every gate, mobs of men were pressing inwards with spears held aloft, bearing the hollow-bowled shields of the Macht warrior class. There were devices on those shields, a city badge.

Rictus looked to his side in the gathering darkness, at Remion. His captors had retrieved their cached panoplies on the way here. White on scarlet, there was painted upon Remion's shield the sigil *gabios*, first letter of his city's name. Almost all the shields below had such devices.

"Isca dies at last," Remion said. "Well, it has been a long time coming, and you folk have been a long time asking for it."

"You thought you were better than us," Broken-nose sneered. "The mighty Isicans, peerless among all the Macht. Now we will fuck your women and slaughter your old and make slaves of your vaunted warriors. What have you to say to that, Iscan?" He punched Rictus in the side of the head.

Rictus staggered, straightened, and slowly rose to his feet. He stared at the death of his city, the red bloom of its fall now beginning to light the darkening sky. Such things happened perhaps once in a generation. He had merely been unlucky, he and all his comrades.

"I say," he said quietly, "that it took not one, nor two, but three cities in alliance to

bring us to this. Without the men of Bas Mathon, and Caralis, you would have been chased clear off the field.”

“Bastard!” and Broken-nose raised his spear. Remion took one step forward, so that he was between them. His eyes did not shift from the sights in the valley below. “The boy speaks the truth,” he said. “The Isicans bested us. Had it not been for the arrival of our allies, it would be Gan Burian burning now.”

Ogio, he of the swollen, punctured face, spoke up. “The Isicans began it. They reap what they have sown.”

“Yes,” Remion said. “They have earned this.” He turned to regard Rictus squarely. “You Isicans put yourselves apart, drilled like mercenaries, made war in the same way others planted the vine and the olive. You made it your business, and became better at it than we. But you forgot something.” Remion leaned closer, so that Rictus was washed by the garlic of his breath. “We are all the same, in the end, all of us. In this world, there are the Kufr, and the Macht. You and I are of the same blood, with the same iron in our veins. We are brothers in our flesh. But forgetting this, you chose to take war—which is a natural thing—to an unnatural end. You sought to enslave my city.”

He straightened. “The extinction of a city is a sin in the eyes of God. A blasphemy. We will be forgiven for it only because it was forced upon us. Look upon Isca, boy. This is God’s punishment for your crime. For seeking to make slaves of your own people.”

Up into the sky the red light of the sack reached, vying with the sunset, merging with it so that it seemed to be all one, the burning city, the dying day, the loom of the white mountains all around, stark peaks blackening with shadow. The end of the world, it seemed. And for Rictus, it was. The end of the life he had known before. For a moment, he was a boy indeed, and he had to blink his stinging eyes to keep the tears from falling.

Broken-nose hoisted his shield up so that the hollow of it rested on his shoulder. “I’m off. If we don’t shift ourselves the prettiest women will all be taken.” He grinned, for a moment becoming almost a likeable man, someone who would stand by his friends, share his wine. “Come, Remion; leave that big ox harnessed here for the wolves. What say you to a scarlet night? We’ll drink each cup to the lees, and rest our heads on something softer than this frozen ground.”

Remion smiled. “You go on, you and Ogio. I will catch you up presently. I have one last business to attend to.”

“You want help?” Ogio asked. His misshapen face leered with hatred as he peered at Rictus.

“Go get the carnifex to look at that hole,” Remion said. “I can attend to this on my own.”

The other two Burians looked at one another and shrugged. They set off, sandals pattering on the cold ground, Rictus’s helm dangling from one of their belts. Down the hillside, following the hardened mud of the road, into the roar and glow of the valley below where they would find recompense for their long day’s trouble.

With a sigh, Remion set down the heavy bronze-faced shield, then laid his spear on the ground. His helm, a light, leather bowl, he left dangling at his waist. From the look of it, he had eaten broth out of it that morning. He took his knife and thumbed the

edge.

Rictus raised his head, exposing his throat.

“Don’t be a damned fool,” Remion snapped. He cut the bindings from Rictus’s wrists, and slid the spear-shaft free of his elbows. Rictus gasped with pain. His hands flooded with fire. He sat back on the ground, air whistling through his teeth, white agony, a feeling to match the sights of the evening.

They sat side by side, the grizzled veteran and the big-boned youth, and watched the dramas below.

“I remember Arienus, when it went up, twenty, twenty-five years ago,” Remion said. “I was a fighting man then, selling my spear for a living, with mercenary scarlet on my back instead of farmer’s felt. I got two women out of the sack and some coin, a horse, and a mule. I thought I had climbed the pig’s back.” He smiled, Isca’s burning lit tiny yellow worms in his eyes.

“I married one of the girls; the other I gave to my brother. The horse bought me citizenship and a *taenon* of hill-land. I became a Burian, put aside the red cloak. I had—I had a son, daughters. The blessings of life. I had heart’s desire.”

He turned to Rictus, his face as hard and set as something hewn out of stone. “My son died at the Hienian River battle, four years back. You killed him, you Iskans.” He looked back at Isca below. It seemed that the spread of the fires was being stymied. Beetled crowds packed the streets still, but now there were chains of men and women leading from the city wells, passing buckets and cauldrons from hand to hand, fighting the flames. Only up around the citadel did it seem that fighting went on. But still, from the houses in the untouched districts, the screams and shouts rose, wails of women outraged, children terrified, men dying in fury and fear that they might not see what was to become of those they loved.

“I fought today because if I had not I would have lost the right to be a citizen of Gan Burian,” Remion said. “We are Macht, all of us. In the world beyond the mountains I have heard that the Kufr tell tales of our savagery, our prowess on the battlefield. But among ourselves, we are only men. And if we cannot treat one another as men, then we are no better than Kufr ourselves.”

Rictus was clenching and unclenching his bulbous fists. He could not say why, but Remion made him feel ashamed, like a child admonished by a patient father.

“Am I your slave?” he asked.

Remion glared at him. “Are you cloth-eared, or merely stupid? Take yourself away from here. In a few days’ time Isca will be no more. We will raze the walls and sow the ground with salt. You are *ostrakr*, boy; cityless. You must find yourself another way to get on in the world.”

The wind picked up. It battered the pines about their heads and made the branches thrash like black wings grasping at the sunset. Remion looked up.

“Antimone is here,” he said. “She has put aside her veil.”

Rictus shivered. The cold from the ground ate into his buttocks. The wound in his side was a half-remembered throb. He thought of his father, of Vasio, the old steward who had helped them on the land. Zori, his wife, a nut-brown smiling woman whose breast Rictus had suckled at after his own mother had died having him. What were they now; carrion?

“There will be stragglers by the hundred out in the hills, looting every farmstead

they come across,” Remion said, as if he had caught the drift of the younger man’s yearning. “And they will be the worst of us, the shirkers who kept to the rear of the battle line. They catch you, and you will not see morning. They’ll rape you twice; once with their cocks, and once with an aichme. I’ve seen it. Do not go back north. Go south, to the capital. Once you’re healed, that broad back of yours will earn your keep in Machran.”

He rose to his feet with a low groan and hoisted shield and spear again. “There’s weapons aplenty lying about the hills, in dead men’s hands. Arm yourself, but take nothing heavy. No point one man alone lugging a battle line shield about. Look for javelins, a good knife.” Remion paused, jaw working angrily. “Listen to me. I’m become someone’s mother. Get yourself away, Iscan. Find yourself a life to live.”

“It happened to you,” Rictus said, through chattering teeth.

“What?”

“Your city was destroyed too. What was its name?”

“You’re a persistent whelp, I’ll give you that.” Remion lifted his head, peered up at the first of the stars. “I was of Minerias once. They had a war with Plaetra, and lost. A bad slaughter. There were not enough men left to man the walls.” He blinked rapidly, eyes fixed on something beyond the cold starlight.

“I was nine years old.”

Without another word, he began to tramp down the hillside towards Isca, spear on one shoulder, shield on the other, the leather helmet butting against the shield rim with every step, like a dull and tired bell. Rictus watched him go, following the dogged shadow he became until he was lost in the press and mob of men about the gates.

Alone. Cityless. *Ostrakr*. Men who were exiled from their city for a crime sometimes chose suicide rather than wander the earth without citizenship. To the Macht, the city was light and life and humanity. Outside, there was only this: the black pines and the empty sky, the world of the Kufr. A world that was alien.

Rictus beat his fists on his frozen thighs and lurched to his feet. Searching the sky he found, as his father had taught him, the bright star that was Gaenion’s Pointer. If he followed it, he would be going north. Back to his home.

That first night became an exercise in finding the dead and avoiding the living. As darkness drew on it became easier to stay clear of the marauding patrols which cast about the country like hounds on the scent of a hare. Most of them carried lit torches and were loud as partygoers. Their comings and goings were marked by the shriek of women, the bubbling death-cries of desperate men, cornered and finished off as part of the night’s sport. The hills were full of these torch-bearing revellers, until it seemed to Rictus that there were more of them on the hunt amid the pine forests and crags around Isca than had faced him in line upon the battlefield.

The dead were less easily found. They were stumbled across in the lightless shadow below the trees. Rictus tripped over a bank of them, and for an instant set his hand on the cold mask of a man’s face. He sprang away with a cry that set the wound in his side bleeding again. By and large the dead had been stripped of everything, sometimes even clothing. They lay pale and hardening in the cold. Out of the dark, packs of vorine had already begun to gather about them, the grey-maned scavengers of the hills.

A healthy man, on his feet, alert and rested, need not fear the vorine, but a man

wounded and reeking of blood, staggering with tiredness—he drew their interest. When they circled him, green eyes blinking in the dark, they snarled their confidence at Rictus, and he snarled back at them, as much a beast as they. Stones, sticks, bravado—he beat them away with these until they went seeking less lively prey.

He stripped a corpse of a long-sleeved chiton, not minding the blood that stiffened it. The dead man lay on top of a broken spear, an aichme with some three feet of shaft still set in it. With these on his back and in his fist, Rictus shivered less. The vorine could smell the bronze, and left him alone. The torchlit patrols inspired anger now as well as fear, and in his head Rictus fantasised about surprising them at their barbarous work, the stump of spear working scarlet wonders in his hand. The fantasy hovered in his mind for pasangs, until he saw it for what it was; a glimmer from the far side of Antimone's Veil. He put it out of his head then, and concentrated on the track before him, that paleness under the stars that ran between the midnight dark of the trees.

One patrol passed him as he lay pressed into the fragrant pine-needles at the side of the track. A dozen men perhaps, they bore the light shields of second-line troops: wicker peltas faced with hide. The *mirian* sigil was splashed in yellow paint across them. These were men of the coastal city, Bas Mathon. Rictus had been there many times with his father; for all that it was eighty pasangs away to the east. He remembered now the gulls screaming over the wharves, the high-prowed fishing smacks, the baskets of silverfin and horrin, bright as spearheads as they were hauled up on the quays. Summer sunlight, a picture from another age. He silently thanked the goddess for granting him the memory.

The men were drinking barley-spirit from leather skins, pressing the bulging bags until the liquid squirted high in the air, and then fighting and laughing like children to have their mouth under as it descended. In their midst two women limped barefoot and naked, heads down and hands bound before them. From the bruises which marked them, they had been captured quite early in the day. One had blood painted all down her inner thighs, and breasts that had only begun to bud. Hardly a woman at all.

They passed by like some twisted revel of the wine-god, lacking only pipe-song to complete the image. Rictus lay a long time in the dark when they had gone, letting the shadow bleed back into his eyes after the dazzling torchlight, seeing beyond the darkness the hopeless face of the young girl, eyes blank as those of a slaughtered lamb. Her name was Edrin. She came from the farm next to his father's. He had played with her as a child, he five years older, carrying her on his back.

It was the middle part of the night before Rictus stood once more at the lip of his father's glen. *Artdunnon*, this place was called; the quiet water. It was brighter now. Rictus looked up to see that both moons were rising above the trees. Great Phobos, the Moon of Fear, and fiery Haukos, Moon of Hope. He bowed to them, as all men must, and then set off down the hillside to where the river glittered amid the pastures in the bottom of the glen.

He could not so much as stub a toe on this track, even in the dark, so well did he know it. The smells of wild garlic from the edge of the woods, the thyme in the rocks, the good loam underfoot; all these were as familiar to him as the beat of his own heart. He allowed himself to hope for the first time since the battle line had broken that morning. Perhaps this place had been passed by. Perhaps his life was not yet shipwrecked beyond hope. Something could be salvaged. Something—

The smell told him. Acrid and strange, it drifted all through the valley bottom. There had been a burning here. It was not woodsmoke, but heavier, blacker. Rictus's pace slowed. He stopped altogether for a few seconds, then forced himself on. Above him the cold face of Phobos rose higher in the night sky, as if wishing to light his way.

Rictus had been a late child, his father already a grey-templed veteran when he had sired him—much like Remion, now he came to think of it. His mother had been a wild hill-girl from one of the goatherder tribes further north. She had been given to his father by a hill-chief in payment for service in war, and he had made of her not a slave, but a wife, because he had been that kind of man.

Perhaps the mountain-blood, the nomad-spirit, was too fine and bright to be chained to a life of the soil. There had been children—two girls—but both had died of the river-fever before they had so much as cut a tooth. Over the years, Rictus had wondered about these pair, these dead siblings who had not even had a chance to acquire personality. He would have liked sisters, company of his own age growing up.

But it was as well, now, that they had died when they did.

Rictus had come along a scant six months after their deaths, a brawny red-faced fighting child with a thick shock of bronze-coloured hair and his mother's grey eyes. He had not been born here at the farm. His father had taken his pregnant young wife to the coast, to one of the fishing villages south of Bas Mathon. He would have no more children carried off by river-fever. There, in the clean salt air, Rictus had entered the world with the waves of the Machtic Sea crashing fifty paces away.

Whatever strength his mother had given to him had been taken out of herself; she had delivered him squatting over a blanket with Zori clucking beside her, and then Rictus's father had carried her to his rented bed so she could bleed to death in comfort. Her ashes had been brought back from the shores of the sea and scattered in the woods overlooking the farm, as those of her dead babes had been before her. Rictus had never been told her name. He wondered if she watched him now. He wondered if his father walked beside her, his arms filled with his smiling daughters.

They had burned the farm, driven off the stock. The longhouse was a gutted, smoking ruin open to the sky. Rictus shuffled to the main door, and as he had expected, most of the bodies lay there. They had fought until the burning thatch came down around them. His father he recognised by the two missing fingers on his spear-hand. He used to call them war's dowry. Were it not for that old wound he would have been in the battle line today beside his son, fighting for his city as every free citizen must. The council had exempted him, because he had given such good service in the past. He had been a rimarch, a file-closer, in his younger days. In the phalanx the best men were placed at the front and the rear of the files, to keep the fainter hearts in the line and lead them into the *othismos*, the hand-to-hand cataclysm that was the heart of all civilized warfare.

Beside Rictus's father lay Vasio, his bald pate the only part of him which was not burnt black; he must have been wearing his old iron helm, but it was gone now. And Lorynx, his father's favourite hound; he lay at his master's feet with his flesh carved to ribbons and the fur seared from his skin. They had all died shoulder to shoulder. Scanning the ground about the house in the bright moonlight, Rictus counted eight separate gouts of blood that had blackened the beaten earth of the yard and now were beginning to glister with frost. A good accounting.

His eyes stung. The burning had kept the vorine from the bodies, but they would soon regain their courage. Things must be done right; his father would have it no other way. Rictus dropped his broken spear and with one hand he ripped the neck of his looted chiton. Eyes open wide he stared up at Phobos and Haukos and began to croon the low, slow lament for the dead, the Paeon, part of the ancient heritage of the Macht as a single people. Men sang it on the death of their kin and they sang it going into battle, the beat of it keeping their feet in step with one another. Rictus had sung it only that morning, heart bursting with pride as the Iscan phalanx had advanced to its doom.

He gathered the bodies together, fighting the urge to retch as the blackened flesh came off in his hands, the white bone laid bare as a carved joint. Zori he found beside the central hearth of the longhouse, beneath a pile of smouldering thatch. She had dressed in her best for the end, and had not been touched by the invaders. Asking her forgiveness, Rictus slipped her pride and joy, her sea-coral pendant, from about her neck before replacing what remained of her veil upon her face. He would have need of it, he told her. She had never denied him anything, and had been his mother in all things but blood.

There were enough red embers to light the pyre. Rictus piled up broken timber, hay, his father's favourite chair, all on top of the bodies of his family, and above them he laid the dog, that he might watch his master's door in the life to come. A flask of barley-spirit he broke over the pyre and it went up with a white flare of hungry flame. He sang the Paeon again, louder this time, to be heard by his mother's spirit so that she might be there to welcome her husband. He stood by the bonfire of his past for a long time, not flinching as the flesh within it popped and shrank in the heat. He stood watching, dry-eyed, until the flames began to sink. Then he lay down beside it with his truncheon of a spear to hand. And, mercifully, he slept at last.

THREE

THE COMPANY OF THE ROAD

Gasca hitched his cloak higher about his shoulders and set one flap to cover his right ear so that the snow might not find so easy a passage. It was a good cloak, goat's leather rimmed with dogskin, but it had been his older brother's before this, and that big bastard had given it much hard wear. Besides which, there was no cloak made that would keep out the bitterness of this evening's wind. But a people who had made their home in the highland valleys of the Harukush had grown up with it. So Gasca shrugged off the discomfort, as a man ought, and kept his head up, using his spear as a staff to pick his way along the treacherous gravelled slush that was the road, his left arm fighting to keep his bronze-faced shield from flapping up like an old man's hat.

The Machran road was not busy, but those who had need to travel it at this time of year tended to draw together somewhat. In the evenings it made for an easier bivouac, and there were informal arrangements. Men gathered firewood, women fetched water. Children got under the feet of all, and were cuffed promiscuously by their elders. It was safer to sleep as part of a large camp, for the footpads and bandits in this part of the hills were renowned. As a fully armed soldier, Gasca had at first been avoided, then courted, and now was welcomed in the company of travellers. He had a fine voice, a pleasant manner, and if he was not the most comely of fellows, he had still the good-natured forbearance of youth to recommend him.

All Machran bound, the company was a varied lot. Two merchants led, with plodding donkeys laden with all manner of sacks and bags. Haughty fellows, they refused to divulge the contents, but it was easy enough to smell the juniper berries and half-cured hides once the fire began to warm them. A pair of young couples followed, the men as possessive as stags around their new wives, the girls flirtatious as only married women can be. Then came a grey-haired matron with the bark of a drillmaster, who herded round her skirts a half dozen ragged urchins, orphans running from some war in the far north. She was taking them to sell in the capital, and looked after them with the close attentiveness a man might show to a good hunting dog. One of the girls, she had already offered to Gasca, but he did not like his meat so tender, and besides, he had no money to spare for such indulgences. The children seemed to sense the essential charity in his nature, and when night fell one or two of them would invariably wriggle under his cloak and sleep curled against him. He did not mind, for they were good warmth, and if they were crawling with vermin, well, so was he.

Five days, this serried company had travelled in each other's ambit, and they had become comrades of the road, sharing food and stories and sometimes going so far as to venture a little personal history about the campfires. The two merchants had unbent somewhat, and over execrable wine had let slip brawny yarns of the battles they had fought in their youth. The young husbands, once they had torn themselves from their bedrolls and wiped the sweat from their brows, confided to the company that they were brothers, married to sisters, and apprenticed to a famous armourer in Machran, Ferrious of Afteni by name, who would teach them his secrets and make of them rich men, artists as much as artisans.

The pimping matron, while picking lice from the hair of one of her charges, extolled the virtues of a certain green-walled house in the Street of the Loom-Makers, where a

man might indulge any craving his appetite could muster, and for a very reasonable fee.

“And you, soldier,” one of the merchants said to Gasca over the fire. “What takes you to Machran? Are you to offer your spear for hire?”

Gasca squeezed himself some wine. It was black root-spirit he guessed, cut with goat’s blood and honey. He had drunk worse, but could not quite remember when.

“I go to take up the red cloak,” he admitted, wiping his mouth, and tossing the flaccid wineskin to one of the wan young husbands.

“I thought so. You bear a blank shield. So you’ll paint some mercenary sigil on it and wear scarlet. Under what commander?”

Gasca smiled. “Whatever one will have me.”

“You’ll be a younger son, I’ll bet.”

“I have two elder brothers, the apples of my father’s eyes. For me it was the red cloak or a goatkeeper’s hut. And my fingers are too big to fit round a goat’s tits.”

The men around the fire laughed, but there was a furtiveness to their regard of him. Though young, Gasca was as broad as any two of them put together, and the glued linen cuirass he wore was stained with old blood. It had been his father’s, as had the rest of the panoply he carried. Stealing them had been no easy thing, and one of his favoured elder brothers had taken a few knocks before Gasca had finally made it clear of his father’s land. These weapons and armour he bore were all he owned in the world, an inheritance he had felt to be his due.

One of the young husbands spoke up. His wife had joined him at the fire, a lazy cat’s-smile on her face. “I hear tell there’s a great company being gathered,” he said. “Not just in Machran, but in cities across all the mountains. There’s a captain name of Phiron, comes from Idrios; he’s hiring fighting men by the hundred. And he’s a cursebearer, too.”

“Where did you hear this?” his wife asked him.

“In a tavern in Arienus.”

“And what tavern was this?”

Gasca’s mind wandered as the squabble grew apace on the far side of the campfire. His own city, Gosthere, where he had the right to vote in assembly, was a mere stockaded town at the headwaters of the Gerionin River, two hundred and fifty pasangs back in the mountains. As much as anything else, he was going to Machran because he wanted to see a real city. Something built of stone, with paved streets that had no shit streaming down the middle of them. In his haversack he had a copy of Tynon’s *Constitution*, which described the great cities of the Macht as if they were all set up in marble, peopled with statues and ruled by stately debate in well-conducted assemblies—not the knockabout mob-gatherings they had been back in Gosthere. That was something he wished to see, and if it did not exist in Machran, it likely never had anywhere.

To serve under a cursebearer—now that too would be something. Gasca had never so much as seen one before. Gosthere’s nobility did not run to such glories. He wondered if the stories about the black armour were true.

I am young, Gasca thought. I have taken my man and my wolf. I have a full panoply. I do not want to own the world; I merely want to see it. I want to drink it by the bucketful and savour every swallow.

“And that bitch; that goatherder she-pig—she was there, wasn’t she?”

“Woman, I tell you I was there for the turn of a water-clock, no more.”

Gasca lay back in his cloak, tugging the folds about him and staring up at the stars. Scudding past the moons there were rags and glimmers of cloud. It would be very cold tonight. As children, he and his brothers had buried embers under their bedrolls on such nights, up in the high grazing. They would chaff each other for hours to the clink of the goat-bells, and Felix, their father’s hound, would always lie next to Gasca. When he growled in the dark they would all be up on their feet in a moment, shuddering with cold, reaching for their boy’s spears. Gasca had been thirteen when he had killed his first wolf. Like all the men of his city, he had chiselled out one of its teeth. As he lay now, far from home, he reached up to his neck and touched it, warm from his flesh. For a moment he felt a pang of loss, remembering his brothers when they had all been boys together, before the complications of manhood. Then he grunted, rolled himself tighter in his cloak, and closed his eyes.

When morning came he found that two of the urchin-children had wormed under his cloak in the night and were spliced to him like wasps to a honeycomb. In the warmth under the cloak all his vermin and theirs had come alive, and he itched damnably. Even so, he was reluctant to rise, for the cloak and the ground around it had a light skiff of snow upon it that had frozen hard, and the sunrise just topping the mountains had kindled from it a hundred million jagged points of rose-coloured light. Even the log-butts from the fire had frost on them. When Gasca blinked, he could feel his eyebrows crackle.

The children squealed as he threw aside the cloak and rose to his feet, stamping his sandals into the stone-hard ground and stretching his limbs to the mountains. He strode out to the roadside and pissed there, standing in an acrid cloud of his own making and blinking the sleep out of his eyes. Looking up and down, he saw the road was empty in both directions. To the south it disappeared between the shoulders of two steep white hills, on one of which there loomed the rocky ruins of a city. That was Memnos. They had hoped to see it this morning when they woke. Machran now lay a mere thirty pasangs away, an easy day’s march. Tonight they would sleep under a roof, those who could afford it. Gasca had promised himself a good meal, and wine worthy of the name. He spat the taste of last night’s out onto the road, grimacing.

Something moved in the treeline. The original builders of the road had hewn back the woods on either side for a bowshot, and though those who maintained it now had not done so well, there were still a good hundred paces of open ground before the tangled scrub and dwarf-pine of the thickets began. In the dawn-light Gasca’s piss-stream dried up as he saw the pale blur of a face move in there. He turned at once and dashed back to the campsite, booting aside one of the yawning urchins. His spear was slick with frost and he cursed as it slipped in his fingers.

By the time he had turned back to the woods the figure was visible. A man walking towards the road with his arms held out from his sides, and in one fist a single-headed spear. The man thrust this point-first into the ground for lack of a sauroter, and then came on with both palms open in the universal gesture. *I mean no harm*. Gasca’s breathing steadied. He strode forward. Others from the company were blinking their way out of their bedrolls, throwing aside furs and trying to make sense of the morning. One of the younger children was crying hopelessly, blue with cold.