



IAN C.
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Stonewielder

A NOVEL OF THE MALAZAN EMPIRE

About the Book

Greymane believed he'd outrun his past. With his school for swordsmanship in Falar, he was looking forward to a more settled existence, although his colleague Kyle wasn't quite so enamoured of life outside the Crimson Guard. However, it is not so easy for an ex-Fist of the Malazan Empire to disappear, especially one declared a traitor.

For the new Emperor is dwelling on the ignominy of the disastrous invasion of the Korel subcontinent. In the vaults beneath the Imperial capital lie the answers, and out of this buried history surfaces a single name: *Stonewielder*.

In Korel, Lord Protector Hiam faces the potential annihilation of all that he holds dear. With few remaining men and a stone wall that has seen better days, he confronts an ancient foe. The Stormriders have returned - and the cult of the Blessed Lady which had stood firm for millennia against this sea-borne enemy now threatens religious war instead.

While chaos looms, a local magistrate investigates a series of murders only to find he's at the heart of a far more ancient and terrifying crime...

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About the Author

Also by Ian C. Esslemont

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STONEWIELDER

A NOVEL OF THE MALAZAN
EMPIRE

Ian C. Esslemont

To Gerri
with love

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DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Of the Malazan Expeditionary Force

Greymane/Orjin Samarr	High Fist, Commander of Expeditionary Force
Kyle	Adjunct to the High Fist
Nok	Admiral, Commander of Naval forces
Swirl	Admiral of Moranth Blue forces
Rillish Jal Keth	Divisional Fist of the Fourth Army
Khemet Shul	Divisional Fist of the Eighth Army
Devaleth	Cadre mage

Malazan 17th Squad, 4th Company, 2nd Division, Fourth Army

Betteries	Company Captain
Goss	Sergeant
Pyke	Heavy infantry
Yana	Heavy infantry
Suth	Heavy infantry
Lard	Heavy infantry
Dim	Heavy infantry
Wess	Heavy infantry
Len	Saboteur
Keri	Saboteur
Faro	Scout

Others

Urfa	Lieutenant of 4th Company saboteurs
Twofoot	Sergeant of the 6th
Coral	Sergeant of the 20th
Tolat	A Barghast scout of 4th Company

Of the Malazan Sixth Army

Yeull 'ul Taith	Overlord
Ussü	High Mage and Adviser
Borun	Commander of Black Moranth
Enesh-jer	Envoy of the Overlord

On the Stormwall

Hiam	Lord Protector of the Stormwall, Commander of all Korelri
Quint	Senior officer (Wall Marshal) of the Stormwall
Shool	Aide to Hiam
Toral Stimins	Master Engineer
Iron Bars	Champion of the Stormwall, and Crimson Guard Avowed
Corlo	A prisoner and Crimson Guardsman
Jemain	A prisoner and member of Bars' crew
Hagen	Ex-Champion of the Stormwall
Tollen	A Malazan prisoner

In the Kingdom of Rool

Bakune	Chief Assessor of Banith
Karien'el	Lieutenant, later Captain, of the City Watch
Hyuke	A city watchman
Puller	A city watchman
Starvann Arl	Abbot of Our Lady the Saviour Cloister and Hospice
Ipshank	An ex-priest of Fener
Manask	A thief

Of the Jourilan Army of Reform

Beneth	Spiritual leader
Hegil Lesour 'an 'al	Commander of the cavalry
Martal	Commander of the army, the 'Black Queen'
Ivanr	Ex-Grand Champion of the Jourilan Imperial Games
Carr	A lieutenant of the army

Of the Crimson Guard

Blues
Fingers
Lazar
Shell

The Synod of Stygg

Totsin Jurth the
Third
Brother Carfin
Sister Gosh
Sister Esa
Sister Nebras
Brother Jool

In the Shadow Realm

Kiska	One-time bodyguard to Tayschrenn, High Mage of the Empire
Jheval	An agent of the Queen of Dreams

Of the Sea-Folk

Orzu	Patriarch of his clan
Ena	A young mother of the clan

PROLOGUE

The Elder Age
Height of the Jacaruku Crusades
The Many Isles

ULI KNEW IT for a bad omen the moment he saw it. He'd been readying his nets for the pre-dawn fishing when the unnatural green and blue aura bruised the sky. It appeared out of the lightening east and swelled, becoming more bloated with every passing moment. The bay was choppy as if as agitated as he, and he'd been reluctant to push his shallow boat out into the waves. But his family had to eat, and cramped stomachs belch no end of complaints.

Through the first of the morning's casts he kept his face averted from the thing where it hung in the discoloured sky, blazing like the baleful eye of some god. The catch that morning was poor: either his distraction, or the fish fleeing the apparition. In either case he decided to abandon the effort as cursed, threw his net to the bottom of the craft, and began paddling for shore. The blue-green eye now dazzled brighter than the sun; he shaded his gaze from the points of alien light glimmering on the waves. He paddled faster.

A strange noise brought his frantic, gasping efforts to a halt. A great roaring it was, like a landslide. He glared about, searching for its source. The alien eye now seemed to fill half the sky. No remnant of the sun's warm yellow glow touched the waters, the treed shore, or the dark humps of the distant islands. Then, with unnatural speed, the surface of the bay stilled as if cowed. Uli held his breath and ducked side to side in his tiny craft.

The eye broke apart. Shards calved trailing blue flames, arcing. A roaring such as he had never before endured drove him to clap his hands to his head and scream his pain. A great massive descending piece like an ember thrown from a god's fire drove smashing down far to the east. A white incandescent blaze blinded Uli's vision. It seemed as if something had struck the big island.

Just as his vision returned, another glow flashed from behind. It threw his shadow ahead like a black streamer across the bay. Turning, he gaped to see a great scattering of shards descending to the west while others cascaded on far above. He rubbed his pained eyes – could it be the end of the world? Perhaps it was another of the moons falling, as he'd heard told of in legends. He remembered his paddle; Helta and the little 'uns would be terrified. He returned to churning water with a desperate fury, almost weeping his dread.

The hide boat ground on to mudflats far sooner than usual. Mystified, he eased a foot over the side. Shallows where none had ever stretched before. And the shore still a good long hike away. It was as if the water were disappearing. He peered up and winced; in the east a massive dark cloud of billowing grey and black was clawing its way up into the sky. It had already swallowed the sun. Untold bounty lay about him: boatloads of fish gasping and mouthing the air, flapping their death-throes.

Yet not one bird. The birds – where had they gone?

The light took on an eerie, darkly greenish cast. Uli slowly edged round, turning his head out to sea, and all hope fell from him. Something was swelling on the waters: a wall of dirty green. Floods such as the old stories tell of. Mountains of water come to inundate the land as all the tales foretell. It seemed to rear directly overhead, so lofty was it. Foam webbed its curved leading face, dirty white capped its peak. He could only gape upwards at its remorseless, fatal advance.

Run, little 'uns, run! The water comes to reclaim the land!

* * *

Approx. 400 years BW (Before the Wall)
The Empty Isles

Temal pushed himself upright from the chilling surf and crouched, sword ready. He gazed uncomprehendingly around the surface of the darkening waters, wiping the cold spray from his face. *Where have they gone? One moment he's fighting for his life and the next the sea-demons disappear like the mist that preceded them.* Weak coughing sounded from his flank. He slogged among the rocks to lift a soaked comrade: Arel, a distant cousin. Though almost faint with exhaustion, Temal dragged the man to shore. Survivors of his war band ran down to the surf to pull both to the reviving warmth of a great bonfire of driftwood.

'What happened?' he stammered through chattering teeth.

'They withdrew,' answered Temal's older sword-brother, Jhenhelf. His tone conveyed his bewildered disbelief. 'Yet why? They had us.'

Temal did not dispute the evaluation; he was too tired, and he knew it to be true. He had less than twenty hale

men in his band and too many of those inexperienced youths.

'They will return with the dawn to finish us,' Jhenhelf continued from across the fire. Temal held his old comrade's gaze through the leaping flames and again said nothing. At their feet Arel coughed, then vomited up the seawater he'd swallowed.

'What of Redden?' one of the new recruits asked. 'We could send for aid.'

Faces lifted all round the fire, pale with chill and fear.

'They could be with us by dawn ...'

'Redden is just as hard-pressed as us,' Temal cut in strongly. 'He must defend his own shore.' He glanced from one strained face to another. 'Redden cannot spare the men.'

'Then—' began one of the youths.

'Then we wait and rest!' Jhenhelf barked. 'Arel, Will, Otten - keep watch. The rest of you, get some sleep.'

Grateful for the support of his old friend, Temal eased himself to the ground. He thrust his sandalled feet out to the fire and tried to ignore the agonizing sting of salt licking his many cuts and gashes. He felt the heat work upon him and hunched forward, hand across his lap at the grip of his sheathed sword, and through slit eyes he watched the mist climb from his drying leathers.

He had no idea why the damned sea-demon Riders attacked. Despite them, it was an attractive land. The peninsulas and islands were rich and cultivable. It was ready to be wholly settled but for a few ignorant native tribals. His father and his grandfather before him had fought to keep their tenuous foothold. As leader of his extended clan he had to think of the future: enough futile wandering! They would hang on to these islands and all the lands beyond. Dark Avallithal with its haunted woods had not suited, nor the savage coast of Dhal-Horn, nor the brooding Isles of Malassa. Here flew their standard. Here

his forebears burned their boats. He would not allow these Riders to force them out; they had nowhere to go.

Temal jerked awake, knocking aside Jhenhelf's touch. It was almost dawn. 'An attack?' He struggled up on legs numb and stiff.

His lieutenant's face held an unfamiliar expression. 'No.' He lifted his chin to their rear, to where the grass-topped cliffs of the shore rose; to the meadows and forests and farmland beyond, all of which would soon be dead and withered should the sea-demons be allowed to work their witchery unmolested.

Everyone, Temal noted, stared inland, not out to sea where they should be keeping watch for the first pearl-like gleams of the Riders' approach. 'What is it?'

Jhenhelf did not answer, and it occurred to Temal that the strange expression on his friend's coarse, battle-hardened face might be awed wonder. He squinted up to the top of the cliffs' ragged silhouette. A figure stood there, tall beneath dark clouds in the red-gold of the coming dawn's light. The proportions of what he was seeing struck Temal as strange: whoever that was, he or she must be a giant to rear so high from so far away ...

'I'll go,' he said, his gaze fixed. 'You keep guard.'

'Take Will and Otten.'

'If I must.'

Dawn was in full flush when they reached the crest, and when they did Will and Otten fell silent, staring. Though the shore breeze was strong, a repulsive stench as of rotting flesh struck Temal. He clenched his lips and stomach against the reek and forced himself onward alone.

The figure was gigantic, out of all proportion, twice the height of the Jaghut or other Elders he'd heard talk of, such as the Toblakai or Tarthinoe, and vaguely female with its long greasy tresses hanging down to its waist, its thrusting

bosom, and the dark tangle of hair at its crotch. Yet its flesh was repulsive: a pale dead fish, mottled, pocked by rotting open sores. The fetor almost made Temal faint. At the thing's side rested a large block of black stone resembling a chest or an altar.

Temal glanced out to sea, to the clear unmarred surface gleaming in the morning light, where no hint of wave-borne sea-demons remained. He glanced back to the figure. *Dark Taker!* Could this be *she*? The local goddess some settlements invoked to protect them? That many claimed offered sanctuary from the Riders?

The broad bloodless lips stretched in a knowing smile, as if the being had read his thoughts. Yet the eyes remained empty of all expression, lifeless, dull, like the staring milky orbs of the dead. Temal felt transformed. *She has come! She has delivered them from certain annihilation at the lances of the sea-demons!* Not knowing what to say he knelt on one knee, offering wordless obeisance. Behind him Will and Otten knelt as well.

The figure took a great sucking breath. 'Outlander,' it boomed, 'you have come to settle the land. I welcome you and offer my protection.' The Goddess gestured with a gnarled and twisted hand to the block at her feet. 'Take this most precious sarcophagus. Within rests flesh of my flesh. Carry it along the coast. Trace a path. Mark it and build there a great wall. A barrier. Defend it that behind it you may rest protected from those enemies from the sea who seek to ravage this land. Do you accept this my gift to you and all your people?'

Distantly, Temal felt cold tears trace lines down his face. Hardly trusting himself to speak, he gasped: 'We accept.'

The Goddess spread her ponderous arms wide. 'So be it. What is done is done. This is our covenant. Let none undo it. I leave you to your great labour.'

Temal bowed again. The Goddess lumbered south in prodigious strides that shook the ground beneath Temal's

knees. She was gone in moments. He did not know how long he remained bowed but in time Will and Otten came to stand with him. The sun bore down hot on his back. Sighing, he straightened, dizzy.

What had he done? What could he have done? No choice. They were losing. Each year they were fewer while the enemy seemed just as strong, if not stronger. But her mere approach had driven them back.

Will found his voice first. 'Was it a Jaghut? Or *her*? The Goddess?'

'It was her. She has offered her protection.'

'Well, she's gone now – they'll be back,' Otten said, ever sceptical.

Temal gestured to the basalt coffin. 'No. She's still here.'

'What is it?' Otten asked, reaching for it.

'*No!*' Temal pushed them back. 'Get Jhenhelf. And Redden.'

'But you said they were to keep guard.'

'Never mind what I said. Listen to me now. Get them both. Tell them to bring wood and rope.'

'But what of the demons?'

'They won't be back. At least, not near us.' He extended a palm to the black glittering block. Heat radiated from it as from a stone pulled from a fire. *Flesh of her flesh. Good Goddess! Gracious Lady! May we never fail you or your trust.*

* * *

Korelri year 4156 sw (Since the Wall)

Year 11 of the Malazan Occupation

Kingdom of Rool

Island of Fist

Karien'el, a lieutenant of the City Watch, led Bakune under the wharf to where the young woman's body lay tangled in

seaweed at the base of the jumbled rocks of the breakwater. The lieutenant, ever conscious of rank, reached up to aid the man across the slippery rocks though he himself carried more years than Bakune, newly installed Assessor of Banith.

With Bakune's arrival at the chilly wave-pounded shore the men of the Watch straightened. A number quickly cinched tight helmets, adjusted leather jerkins and the hang of their truncheons and their badge of honour: swords – albeit shortswords – which they alone among the subject peoples of Fist were allowed to carry by the Malazan overlords. Also conscious of rank, in his own way, Bakune answered the salutes informally, hoping to set them all at ease. It still did not feel right to him that these men, many veterans of the wars of invasion, should salute him. Uncomfortable, and hugging his robes to himself for warmth, he raised a brow to the Watch lieutenant. 'The body?'

'Here, Assessor.' The lieutenant led him down to the very edge of lazy swells and blackened, seaweed-skirted boulders large as wine tubs. An old man waited there, sun and wind-darkened, kneeling on scrawny haunches, tattered sandals on filthy feet, in a ragged tunic with a ragged beard to match.

'And this one?' Bakune asked Karien'el.

'Brought us to the body.'

The old man knelt motionless, his face flat, carefully watchful. The body lay at his feet. Bakune crouched. Newly cast up; the smell did not yet overpower the surrounding shore stink. Naked. Crabs had gnawed extremities of hands and feet; had also taken away most of the face (or deliberate disfigurement?). Very young, slim, no doubt once attractive. A prostitute? Odd marks at the neck – strangulation. Faded henna tattoos – a common vanity.

Without looking up Bakune asked: 'Who was she to you?'

‘No one,’ the old man croaked in thickly accented Roolian.

‘Then why the Watch?’

‘Is one anonymous dead girl not worth your attention?’

Bakune slowly raised his head to the fellow: dark features, kinky greying hair. The black eyes in return studied him with open, what others might term impertinent, intent. He lowered his head, picked up a stick to shift the girl’s arm. ‘You are a tribesman. Of the Drenn?’

‘You know your tribes. That is unusual for you invaders.’

Bakune peered up once again, his eyes narrowed. ‘Invaders? The Malazans are the invaders.’

A smile empty of any humour pulled at the edge of the old man’s lips. ‘There are invaders and then there are invaders.’

Straightening, Bakune dropped the stick and regarded the old man directly. As a trained Assessor he knew when he himself was being ... *examined*. He crossed his arms. ‘What is your name?’

Again the patient smile. ‘In your language? Gheven.’

‘Very well, Gheven. What is your – assessment – here?’

‘I’m just an itinerant tribal, vaunted sir. What should my opinion matter?’

‘It matters to me.’

The lips hardened into a straight tight line; the eyes almost disappeared into their nests of wrinkles. ‘Does it? Really?’

For some odd reason Bakune felt himself almost faltering. ‘Well, yes. Of course. I am the Assessor. It is my duty.’

A shrug and the hardened lines eased back into the distant, flat watchfulness. ‘It’s more and more common now,’ he began, ‘but it goes far back. You all blame the Malazan troops, of course. These Malazans, they’ve been here for what, ten years now? They walk your streets, billet themselves in your houses and inns. Visit your taverns.

Hire your prostitutes. Your women take up with them. Often these girls are killed for such mixing. Usually by their own fathers or brothers for smearing what they call their "honour"—'

'That's a damned lie, tribal scum! It's the Malazans!'

Bakune almost jumped - he'd forgotten the Watch lieutenant. He raised a placating hand to the man who stood seething, knuckles white on the grip of his shortsword. 'You said *usually* ...?'

The man's lined face had knotted in uncompromising distaste; his gnarled hands remained loose at his sides. He seemed unaware of, or indifferent to, how close he was to being struck down. Luckily for him Bakune shared his disgust, and, generally, his assessment as well. Gheven nodded his craggy head up and down, and the tightened lips unscrewed. 'Yes. *Usually*. But not this time. Much of the flesh is gone but note the design high on the right shoulder.'

Bakune knelt, and, dispensing with the niceties of any stick, used his own hands to shift the body. The henna swirls were old and further faded by the bleaching of the seawater, but among the unremarkable geometric abstracts one particular symbol caught his eye ... a broken circle. A sign of one of the new foreign cults outlawed by their native Korel and Fistian church of their Saviour, their Lady of Deliverance. He tried to recall which one among the bewildering numbers of all those foreign faiths, then he remembered: a minor one, the cult of the 'Fallen God'.

'What of it? You are not suggesting that just because of one such tattoo the Guardians of Our Lady—'

'I am suggesting worse. Note the bruises at the throat. The cuts at the wrists. It has been a long time, has it not, Assessor, since the one who you claim protects you from the sea-demons, the Riders, has demanded her payment, yes?'

‘Drenn filth!’ Karien’el grasped the man by the neck. Iron scraped wood as his sword swung free of its scabbard.

‘*Lieutenant!*’ The man froze, panting his fury. ‘You forget yourself. Release him. I am assessing here.’

Slowly, reluctantly, the officer peeled his fingers free and slammed home the blade, pushing the man backwards. ‘Same old lies. Always defaming Our Lady despite her protection. She protects even you, you know. You tribals. From the sea-demons. You should stay in your mountains and woods and consider yourselves blessed.’

Gheven said nothing, but in the old man’s taut, almost rigid, mien Bakune saw a fierce unbowed pride. The dark eyes shifted their challenge to him. ‘And what is your judgement here ... *Assessor?*’

Bakune retreated from the shoreline where stronger waves now cast up cold spray that chilled his face. He pulled a handkerchief from a sleeve to dab away the briny water. ‘Your, ah, suspicions are noted, Gheven. But I am sorry. Strong accusations require equally strong evidence and that I do not see here. Barring any further material facts the murder remains as you originally suggested – a murder or a distasteful honour killing. That is my assessment.’

‘We are finished here?’ Karien’el asked. His slitted eyes remained unwavering on the old tribesman.

‘Yes. And Lieutenant, no harm is to come to this man. He did his duty in calling our attention to an ugly crime. I will hold you personally responsible.’

The officer’s sour scowl twisted even tighter but he bowed his accord. ‘Yes, Assessor.’

Climbing back up on to the breakwater walk Bakune adjusted his robes and clenched his chilled fingers to bring life back to them. Of course he’d seen the marks encircling the neck, but some things one must not admit aloud – at least not so early in one’s career. He regarded the lieutenant who had followed, one boot on the stone ledge,

ever dutiful. 'Report to me directly the discovery of any more such bodies. Or rumoured disappearances of youths, male or female. There may be a monster among us, Karien.'

A salute of fingertips to the knurled brow of his iron helmet. 'Aye, Assessor.'

The officer descended the slope, his boots scraping over the boulders, cloak snapping in the wind. Bakune hugged himself for warmth. The coast, Lady, how he hated it: the chill wind that smelled of the Riders, the clawing waters, the cold damp that mildewed all it touched. Yet a positive review here could lead to promotion and that posting in Paliss he hoped for ... yet another good reason for discretion.

He looked for the tribesman down among the wet boulders but the man was gone. Good. He didn't want a beating on his conscience. What an accusation! Why jump to such an assessment? True, long ago the ancient ways sanctioned such acts in the name of the greater good - but all that had been swept aside by the ascendancy of Our Saviour, the Blessed Lady. *And in their histories it is plain that that man's ancestors practised it, not ours! Thus the long antipathy between us and these swamp-and wasteland-skulking tribals with their bastardized blood.*

Perhaps in truth a killing by an enraged father or brother, but without sufficient evidence who can assess? In lieu of evidence the locals will decide that this one, like all those prior, was plainly the work of their bloody-handed murderous occupiers, the Malazans.

* *

From between tall boulders Gheven watched the two walk away. The Watch officer, Karien'el, lingered, searching for him. That did not trouble him; he intended to be moving on in any case. In the eyes of the Roolian occupiers of this land they called Fist he was officially itinerant, after all. And

why not, since he was on pilgrimage – an itinerary of sacred paths to walk and sites to visit, and in walking and visiting thus reinscribing and reaffirming? A remarkable confluence of diametric attitudes aligning.

He turned to go. With each step the dreamscape of his ancient ancestral land unfolded itself around him. For the land was their Warren and they its practitioners. Something all these foreign invaders, mortal and immortal, seemed incapable of apprehending. And he too was finished here. The seeds had been sown; time would tell how strong or deep the roots may take.

If this new Assessor was true to his calling then Gheven pitied him. Truth tellers were never welcome; most especially one's own. Better to be a storyteller – they at least have grasped the essential truth that everyone prefers lies.

* * *

Korelri year 4176 sw
Year 31 of the Malazan Occupation
Kingdom of Rool
Island of Fist

The occupant of the small lateen-rigged launch manoeuvred it through the crowded Banith harbour to tie up between an oared merchant galley out of Theft, and a rotting Jourilan cargo scow. He threw his only baggage, a cloth roll cinched tight by rope, on to the dock, then climbed up on to the mildewed blackwood slats. He straightened his squat broad form, hands at the small of his back, and stretched, grimacing.

An excise officer taking inventory on the galley pointed his baton of office. 'You there! You can't tie up here! This is a commercial dock. Take that toy to the public wharf.'

'Take what?' the man asked blandly.

The dock master opened his mouth to respond, then shut it. He'd thought the fellow old by his darkly tanned shaven head, but power clearly remained in the meaty thick neck, rounded shoulders, and gnarled, big-knuckled hands. More alarmingly, faded remnants of blue tattoos swirled across his brow, cheeks, and chin, demarking a fiercely snarling boar's head. 'The boat - move the boat.'

'Tain't mine.'

'Yes it is! I saw you tie it up just now!'

'You there,' the fellow called to an old man in rags on his hands and knees scouring the dock with a pumice stone. 'How about a small launch? Battered but seaworthy.'

The elder stared then laughed a wet cackle, shaking his head. 'Haven't the coin.'

The newcomer threw a copper coin to the dock. 'Now you do.'

The excise officer's gaze flicked suspiciously between the two. 'Wait a moment ...'

The old man took up the coin, cocked an amused eye at the excise officer and tossed it back. The newcomer snatched it from the air. 'Talk to this man,' he told the officer, turning his back.

'Hey! You can't just—'

'I'll be moving my boat right away, sir!' the old man cackled, revealing a dark pit empty of teeth. 'Wouldn't *think* of tying up here, sir!'

Walking away, the newcomer allowed his mouth to widen in a broad frog-like grin beneath his splayed, squashed nose.

He passed Banith's harbour guardhouse, where his gaze lingered on the Malazan soldiers lounging in the shade of the porch. He took in the opened leather jerkin of one, loosened to accommodate a bulging stomach; the other dozing, chair tipped back, helmet forward over his eyes.

The newcomer's smile faded. Ahead, the front street of Banith ran roughly east-west. The town climbed shallow coastal hills, its roofs dominated by the tall jutting spires of the Holy Cloister and the many gables of the Hospice nearby. Beyond these, rich cultivated rolling plains, land once forested, stretched into the mist-shrouded distance. The man turned right. Walking slowly, he studied the shop fronts and stalls. He passed a knot of street toughs and noted the much darker or fairer hues of mixed Malazan blood among them, so different from the uniformly swart Fistian heritage.

'Cast us a coin, beggar priest,' one bold youth called, the eldest.

'All I own is yours,' the fellow answered in his gravelly voice.

That brought many up short. Glances shot between the puzzled youths until the older tough snorted his disbelief. 'Then hand it all over.'

The squat fellow was examining an empty shop front. 'Easily done - since I own nothing. This building occupied?'

'Debtors' prison,' answered a girl, barefoot, in tattered canvas pants and dirty tunic, boasting the frizzy hair of mixed Korel and foreign parentage. 'Withholding taxes from the Malazan overlords.'

The man raised his thick arms to it. 'Then I consecrate it to my God.'

'Which of all your damned foreign gods is that?'

The man turned. A smile pulled up his uneven lips and distorted the faded boar's head tattoo. His voice strengthened. 'Why, since you ask ... Let me tell you about my God. His domain is the downtrodden and dispossessed. The poor and the sick. To him social standing, riches and prestige are meaningless empty veils. His first message is that we are all weak. We all are flawed. We all are mortal. And that we must learn to accept this.'

'Accept? Accept what?'

‘Our failings. For we are all of us imperfect.’

‘What is the name of this sick and perverted god?’

The priest held out his hands open and empty. ‘It is that which resides within us – each god is but one face of it.’

‘Each god? All? Even Our Lady who shields us from evil?’

‘Yes. Even she.’

Many of the gang flinched then, wincing, and they moved off as they sensed a more profound and disquieting sacrilege flowing beneath the usual irreverence of foreigners.

‘And his second message?’ a girl asked. She had stepped closer, but her eyes remained watchful on the street, and a sneer seemed fixed at her bloodless lips.

‘Anyone may achieve deliverance and grace. It is open to all. It cannot be kept from anyone like common coin.’

She pointed to her thin chest. ‘Even us? The divines of the Sainted Lady turn us away from their thresholds – even the Hospice. They spit at us as half-bloods. And the old Dark Collector demands payment for all souls regardless.’

The man’s dark eyes glittered his amusement. ‘What I speak of cannot be bought by any earthly coin. Or compelled by any earthly power.’

Perplexed, the girl allowed her friends to pull her on. But she glanced back, thoughtful, her sharp brows crimped.

Smiling to himself again, the newcomer took hold of the door’s latch and pushed with a firm steady force until wood cracked, snapping, and the door opened. He slept that night on the threshold under his thin quilted blanket.

He spent the next morning sitting in the open doorway, nodding to all who passed. Those who did not spurn his greeting skittered from him like wary colts. Shortly after dawn a Malazan patrol of six soldiers made its slow deliberate round. He watched while coins passed from

shopkeepers into the hands of the patrol sergeant; how the soldiers, male and female, helped themselves to whatever they wanted from the stalls, eating bread, fruit, and skewered meat cooked over coals as they swaggered along.

Eventually they came to him and he sighed, lowering his gaze. He'd heard it was bad here in Fist – which was why he'd come – but he'd no idea it was this bad.

The patrol sergeant stopped short, his thick, dark brows knitting. 'What in the name of Togg's tits is a Theftian priest of Fener doing here?'

The newcomer stood. 'Priest, yes. But no longer of Fener.'

'Kicked out? Buggery maybe?'

'No – you get promoted for that.'

The men and women of the patrol laughed. The sergeant scowled, his unshaven jowls folding in fat. He tucked his hands into his belt; his gaze edged slyly to his patrol. 'Looks like we got an itinerant. You have any coin, old beggar?'

'I do.' The priest reached into a fold of his tattered shirt and tossed a copper sliver to the cobbled road.

'A worthless Stygg half-penny?' The sergeant's fleshy mouth curled.

'You're right that it's worthless. All coins are worthless. It's just that some are worth less than others.'

The sergeant snorted. 'A Hood-damned mystic too.' He pulled a wooden truncheon from his belt. 'We don't tolerate layabouts in this town. Get a move on or I'll give you payment of another kind.'

The priest's wide hands twitched loosely at his sides; his frog-like mouth stretched in a straight smile. 'Lucky for you I no longer have any use for that coin either.'

The sergeant swung. The truncheon slapped into the priest's raised open hand. The sergeant grunted, straining. His tanned face darkened with effort. Yanking, the priest came away with the truncheon, which he then cracked

across his knee, snapping it. He threw the shards to the road. The men and women of the patrol eased back a step, hands going to swords.

The sergeant raised a hand: *Hold*. He gave the priest a nod in acknowledgement of the demonstration. 'You're new, so I'll give you this one. But from now on this is how it's gonna work - you want to stay, you pay. Simple as that. Otherwise, it's the gaol for you. And here's a tip ... stay in *there* long enough and we sell your arse to the Korelri. They're always lookin' for warm bodies for the wall and they don't much care where they come from.' He eased his head from side to side, cracking vertebrae, and offered a savage smile. 'So, you're a priest. We got priests too. Guess I'll send them around. You can talk philosophy. Till then - sleep tight.'

The sergeant signalled for the patrol to move on. They left, grinning. One of the female soldiers blew a kiss.

The priest sat back down to watch them as they went, collecting yet more extortion money. The street youths, he noted, were nowhere in evidence. *Damn bad. Worse than he'd imagined. It's a good thing the old commander isn't here to see this. Otherwise it would be the garrison itself in the gaol.*

He picked up the two shards of the truncheon, hefted them. *Still, mustn't be too harsh. Occupation and subjugation of a population - intended or not - is an ugly thing. Brutalizing. Brings out the worst in both actors. Look at what he'd heard of Seven Cities. And this is looking no better.*

Well, he has his God. The priest's wide mouth split side to side. *Ah yes, his God. And a browbeaten and oppressed population from which to recruit. Fertile ground.* He edged his head sideways, calculating. *Yes ... it just might work ...*

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