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SHADOW
CASSET

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THE SHADOW CASSET

BOOK TWO OF
THE DARKWATER LEGACY

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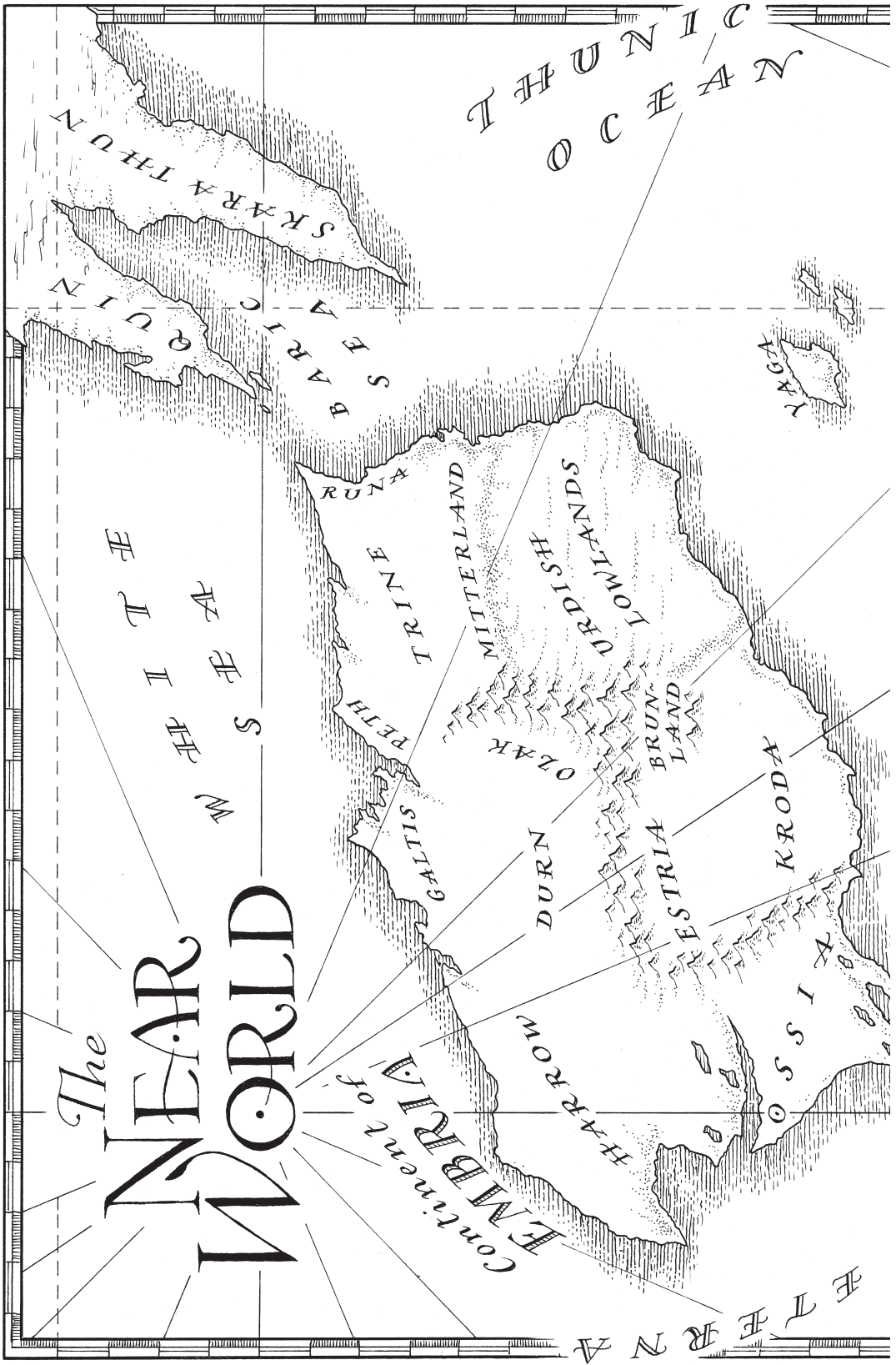
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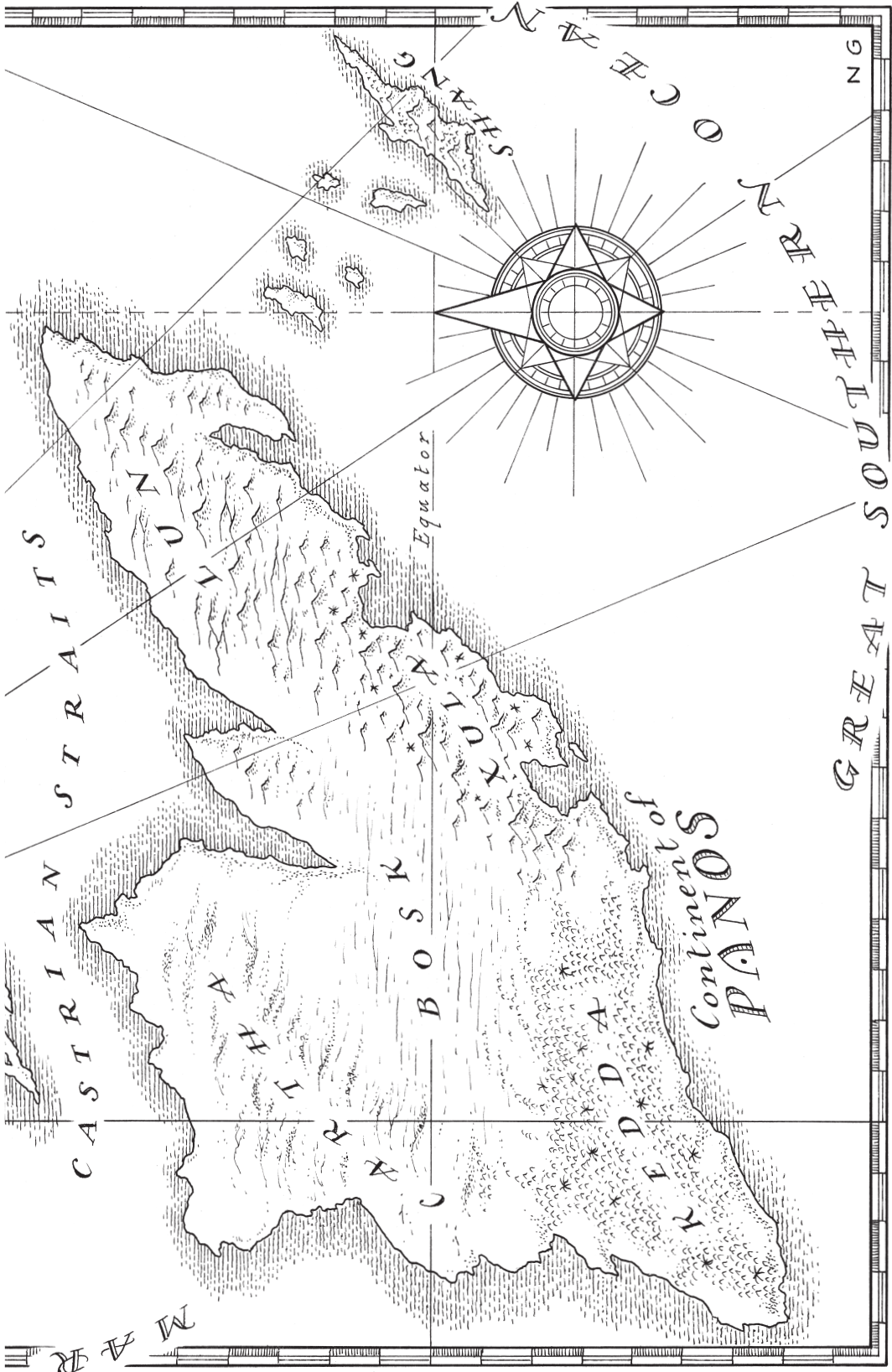
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The NEAR WORLD





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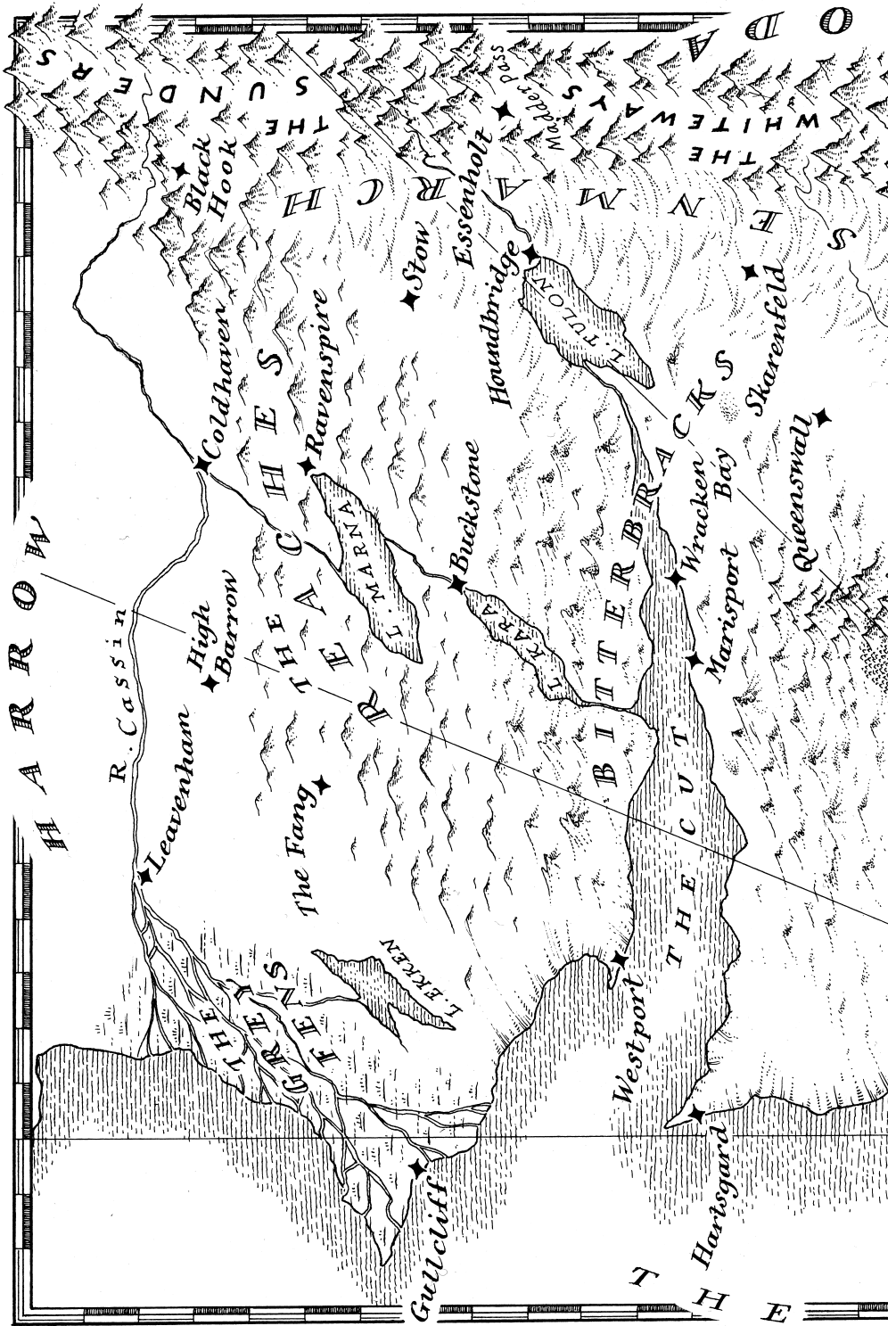
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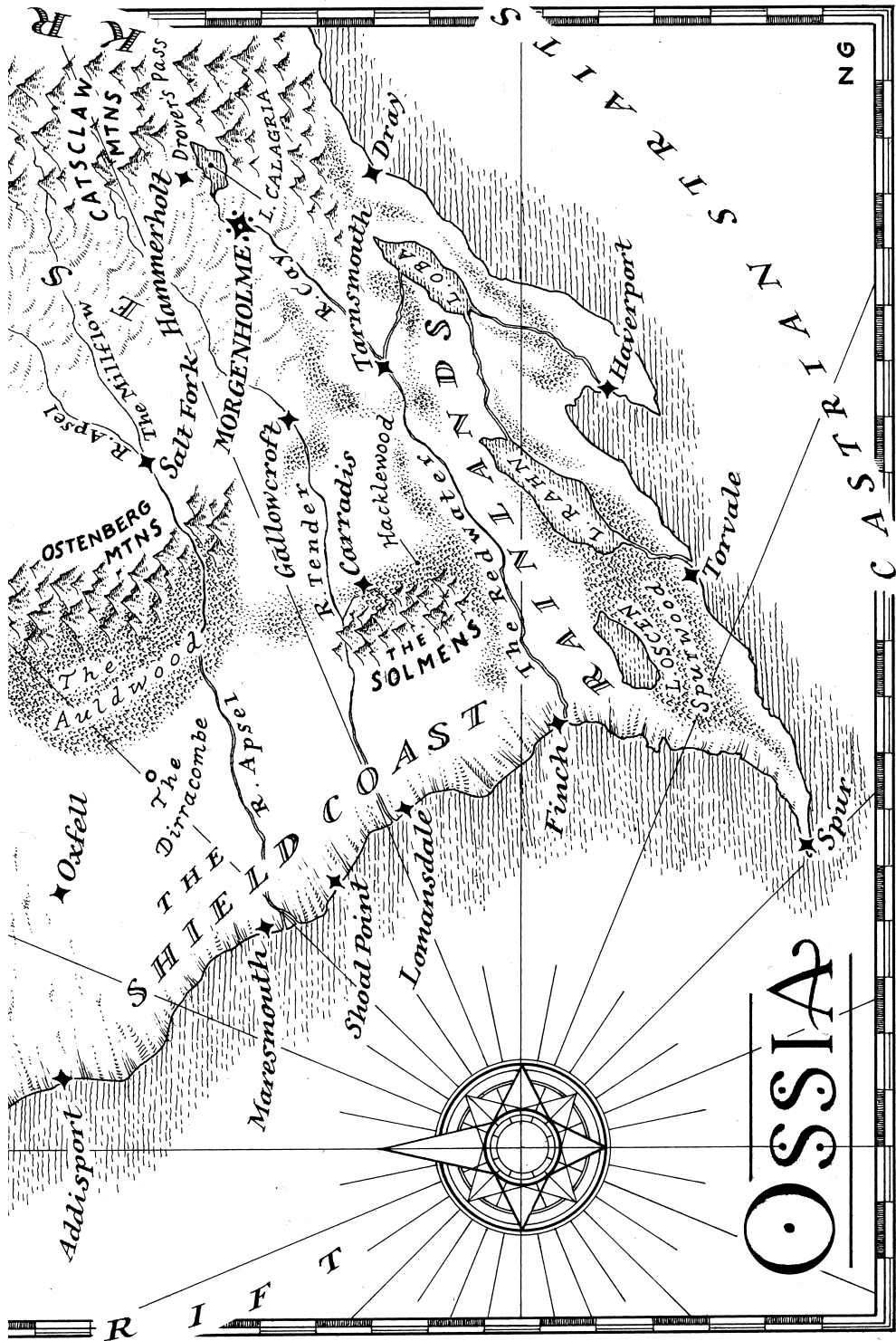
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I

The things we value make us weak.

Klyssen sat hunched over a desk, examining the message before him, his bad eye watering in the lanternlight. In his hands he held a small brass cylinder made up of five rings of letters which he rotated from time to time. Now and then he scribbled in the margins with a quill, turning innocent words to damning testimony, pleasantries to betrayal.

No one understood betrayal like Marius Klyssen.

Click-click-click. He turned the rings again. A new combination, another piece of the hidden report revealed. It was his own private cipher, known only to himself and his network of spies, each of whom had been drawn into his service through the careful application of threats and promises. Everyone had something they'd give anything for. It was just a matter of finding it and using it against them.

He took off his spectacles and pinched the bridge of his nose. The effort of decoding the letter was bringing on a headache. More reports of sedition and discontent, people saying things about the Empire they'd never have dared to before. Once he'd have stamped on them. These days he found it hard to care. No point crushing roaches one by one when the house was already infested.

He pushed the letter aside and leaned back in the chair with a creak. The study was quiet and restless with flickering shadows. A cool wind blew against the shutters, bringing with it the smell of charred meat and the faint sound of screaming.

There was a present on the desk, next to the lantern that illuminated the room. A cream-coloured box, gift-wrapped in blue ribbon. He replaced his spectacles, considered it a moment, then reached over and pulled the bow. Whoever it was intended for would have no use for it now, and he was an incurable investigator.

The box fell neatly apart, revealing a silver casket inlaid with a design of bold geometric shapes and rays. Krodan through and through. Just the sort of thing he'd expect to find in the study of an Ossian manor. They loved to ape their betters.

It looked like a cigar box, and he was partial to cigars. The smoke was hard on his stomach, but lighting one would give him a moment's pleasure, and that was as much as he could hope for these days. Besides, he'd long since stopped caring about his health.

He flipped open the casket. The quiet was pierced by the tinny chimes of a nursery rhyme. A painted princess, one arm aloft, rotated before a mirror.

A music box. Likely a present from the lord to his daughter, a gift he'd meant to give and never would. Klyssen felt his throat thicken as the music played. It was a song from his homeland, sung to him at his mother's knee, as he'd sung it in turn. When the tune came around again, he began to murmur hoarsely along.

*Little star, oh little star,
Lay down your head.
The time's right for dreaming,
The sun's gone to bed.*

He faltered as he caught sight of himself in the mirror. Even after three years, his reflection never failed to shock him when it caught him unawares. The drooping eye, the red-raw landscape of scar tissue across his cheek and jaw, the burned patches where hair refused to grow. He'd never been a handsome man, but the lanternlight made a ghoulish of him, a storybook terror peering hungrily from the darkness into a world of beauty he was forever banished from.

Small wonder she left me, he thought. *Small wonder she took my girls away.*

His mouth twisted in bitter anger. No, that wasn't why she'd left him. It was his power she'd loved, not his face. His status and wealth were what bound her to him. Once they were gone, so was she.

He snapped the lid shut, silencing the music, hiding the princess and the ghoul from his sight.

The things we value make us weak, he thought. And I have been made weak indeed.

Rage boiled up in him and he swept the lantern from the desk. Flame raced along the floor where it shattered, climbing curtains and bookshelves. Klyssen watched for a time, the fire reflecting in the round lenses of his spectacles. Then he got to his feet and stalked outside, where the rest of the village was burning, too.

The manor house stood atop a rise overlooking the sluggish river from which Darkwater took its name. As Klyssen stepped onto the porch the town spread out before him, black silhouettes of buildings billowing with fire, hazy in the smoke. Soldiers moved among them, swords drawn, hunting. Thin shrieks sounded over the rumble of flame and the periodic crash of collapsing timber.

Behold the wrath of the Emperor, Klyssen thought scathingly.

Ossia wasn't the land it had once been. The Krodans had come as conquerors, but they made war to bring peace. Submit to your superiors, they said, and you will be treated well. Most saw the wisdom in that, and for thirty years the compact had held. The Krodans brought order, education and the gift of the Word and the Sword to their backward neighbours. The Ossians prospered, sheltered from their enemies by the Empire's armies.

But all that came to an end when Hammerholt fell, and the Emperor's only son was murdered. Then the open hand of the Empire became a fist. If Ossians wouldn't be ruled like civilised subjects, they'd be chained and beaten like dogs.

So the terror began.

Since Hammerholt, Klyssen had seen towns turned over for the merest suspicion of harbouring a spy. He'd seen mass arrests at festivals and weddings, because there were too many people present and assembly bred conspiracy. He'd seen executions carried out on

the thinnest of pretexts, but none thinner than tonight's. For there was no sedition here, no evidence of rebellion. Darkwater's only crime was this: over fifty years ago, a boy had been born here, and that boy grew up to kill Prince Ottico. Cadrac of Darkwater, the Dawnwarden later known as Garric, was beyond punishment now; but the Emperor's grief was only exceeded by his fury, and that fury needed a target. He'd personally ordered the village erased from the map, and every man, woman and child in it executed.

This is not Krodan justice. This is cold-blooded slaughter.

He made his way down the path towards Darkwater, flames licking through the manor behind him. He'd told Gremmler he wanted to investigate the manor for evidence of sedition before they burned it down, but in truth he'd just wanted to absent himself. Executing traitors had never bothered him in the past, because he believed in the superiority of the Krodan way of life. His people were guided by the divine hand of the Primus. Their methods, though harsh, were necessary and effective.

But these were not traitors, and this was nothing more than petty vengeance, the act of a tyrant. The Emperor would see Ossia razed barren if he could. The moderating influence of more sensible heads had prevented something like this from happening before, but their influence had waned, it seemed. How many more Darkwaters would follow now?

By morning, this town and its people would be gone. From this day forth, it wouldn't appear on any map. But its legacy couldn't be so easily wiped away. The growing sense of rebellion that had been building since Hammerholt wouldn't be undone by one childish act of spite. It would only serve to turn this previously insignificant village into a legend. Stories of the atrocity would grow and spread, further uniting the Ossians against their occupiers. This land was ready to explode, and the Emperor had thrown a spark.

But then, perhaps that had been his intention.

He passed the mill on the riverbank just outside the village. Flames reached up into the moonless night, reflected on the black water. A half-dozen villagers knelt facing the fire, praying and whimpering, under guard. A soldier was passing along the line behind them. As he reached each prisoner, he tipped their head

to the side and thrust his sword down between neck and shoulder, into their heart.

Nearby was a heap of bodies that were being slung into the blazing mill one by one in lieu of a proper pyre. Klyssen saw two men lift a corpse by its wrists and ankles. They swung it between them and tossed it through the doorway in a tumble of fragile, gangly limbs. The boy couldn't have been more than nine. After that, he was unable to look any more.

What are we becoming?

There was only one road through the village, a thoroughfare of churned dirt flanked by burning houses. The heat of the flames beat at him as he walked, and he shrank into his black overcoat, pulling it higher up his neck as if he could hide inside it. His skin prickled, and for a moment he was back in that vault in Hammerholt, shrieking and pawing at his face where he'd been splattered by some concoction flung by that Nemesis-damned witch. His heart began to pound as he remembered the agony, how he'd beaten at the flames to no avail because he couldn't get it off, he couldn't get it *off*!

He stopped in the middle of the road, squeezed his eyes shut and took a shuddering breath to quell the rising panic. *I am authority*, he reminded himself. He was an officer of the Iron Hand and an inquisitor of the Empire. It wouldn't do to show frailty.

With an effort of will, he summoned the memory again and faced it. This time it didn't shake him. He made himself recall what had followed: how they'd shut the vault door, sealing him in with the burning husk of a dreadknight and a few terrified soldiers; the frantic search for a way to escape before the flames dwindled and left them in darkness; the glorious relief as his fingers found the door-release lever, put there in case anyone should accidentally shut themselves in. After that there was the explosion, the fortress collapsing around them, the desperate flight to the outside. He dragged each horror out and confronted it, and when he was done, he was in control once more.

I am authority, he told himself again, and this time it felt true. Not quite as authoritative as before, after disgrace and demotion, but thanks to some clever manoeuvring and a little creative

blackmail he'd avoided worse punishment. He was still free, at least. For what that was worth.

He found Gremmler on the far side of the village, in conference with Captain Malloch. Both men were towering and broad-shouldered, Gremmler in the black overcoat of the Iron Hand, Malloch formidable in his armour. Gremmler was handsome and aristocratic, Malloch pox-pitted and thuggish. Klyssen loathed them both, but then, he loathed most people to some degree.

Not his daughters, though. Not Lisi and Juna. The rare days that Vanya allowed him to see them were the only bright spots in a world gone to darkness. Their smiles and kisses were the only things that made it all worthwhile.

Malloch saw Klyssen approaching and excused himself to go and check on his men, leaving the inquisitors to their business. He saluted them both as he left – a closed fist raised smartly to his shoulder, arm diagonally across his chest – but Klyssen saw vague disdain in his gaze as their eyes met. The captain had never thought much of Klyssen. Klyssen had never given him much cause to.

'Watchman Klyssen,' said Gremmler. He never failed to include Klyssen's rank when addressing him. Klyssen used to do that to his own subordinates, to assert himself over them. He wasn't sure Gremmler was that subtle – he was probably just being correct – but it rankled to be reminded of his demotion all the same.

'Overwatchman Gremmler,' said Klyssen. Balding, frog-faced and scarred, he was Gremmler's physical inferior in every way. If he didn't know better, he'd have suspected Commander Bettren had put them together as a malicious joke.

'Did your investigations bear fruit?'

'I found nothing,' said Klyssen. In truth, he hadn't bothered to look; it would have been a waste of time. There was no treachery in Darkwater. Not that innocence had saved the villagers.

'Good,' said Gremmler. 'Better that there's no doubt. Throwing a sop to the Ossians would only have muddied the message.'

'We still need the Ossian highborns on our side if we want to run this country. Evidence of sedition would give them something to cling to. People will justify anything to themselves if they are

handed the means to do it. Deny them that, and they might be forced to question their arrangement with us.'

'If these nobles whose feelings you value so highly had curbed their countrymen as they were meant to, we wouldn't be where we are now,' Gremmler replied. As ever, he was only pretending to entertain Klyssen's opinion. His thoughts were the thoughts of the Empire. Deviation from the official line was inconceivable. 'They had their chance. Let them see what rebellion has earned them. For each Krodan life we will take twenty of theirs. Not only traitors, but their families and friends, too. We will see how keen they are to strike at us then.'

'We should be careful how far we push them,' Klyssen advised. 'A man who cannot live with himself is apt to find something to die for.'

'You should concern yourself less with protecting Ossians and more with following orders,' said Gremmler, a warning in his voice.

'My concern is protecting the Empire, as it has ever been,' Klyssen replied.

'And you know how to do that better than the Emperor?' Gremmler asked sharply.

Yes. Because I know Ossians. And if you think you can cow them by murdering their kinfolk, then you're as much a fool as he.

'Well?' Gremmler snapped, when Klyssen's silence had stretched long enough to be insolent. 'Do you?'

'Of course not,' said Klyssen, with a deferential and insincere smile. 'Hail to the Emperor.'

Why do I do this? he thought as he stood on the riverbank watching sparks fly up into the night. Darkwater was an inferno. The soldiers had retreated, their killing all done. Klyssen felt nothing but disgust at what had passed tonight.

Why did he carry on? It was no easy question. Everything he'd truly valued had been lost. The Empire, whose ideals had been the blood and breath in his body, was becoming something he didn't recognise. Perhaps he just kept going because there was nothing else. Nothing but vengeance.

Aren of Shoal Point. Even his name flooded Klyssen with rage.

The druidess had burned him, but the boy was the true author of his ruin. To be wounded in battle was no disgrace, but to be humbled? The humiliation was impossible to bear. Aren had betrayed and outwitted him, freed Garric from prison so he could murder the prince and stolen the Ember Blade from under his nose. If not for him, Klyssen would have been Commander of the Iron Hand in Ossia by now, instead of that milquetoast Bettren. If not for him, he'd still have his wife and children.

Aren might have forgotten him, but he hadn't forgotten Aren. The net was closing on him and he didn't even know it.

He let out a breath, relaxed his clenched fists. *Diligence, temperance, dominance*, he reminded himself: the credo of the Krodan Empire. Once he'd been a shining example of all three. Now he was subject to attacks of despondency and rage that he was powerless against, and his insubordination was becoming worse by the season. He was aware that he was sabotaging himself by disrespecting his superiors, but he was unable to stop.

Why couldn't he just surrender to the tide of things? The fate of the Empire was beyond his control. He just needed to do his job, get by, survive. Where was the profit in making things more difficult for himself?

He didn't know the answer to that. All he knew was that he was no longer the man he'd been. How could he be? How much could somebody lose and still remain the same? How much could they sacrifice for a cause before it made a hollow puppet of them, a minion to an ideal, jerked mindlessly hither and thither by the strings of their beliefs? Something vital had gone, he sensed it, and all that remained to define him were the tasks he was expected to perform. If he didn't submit to that drab, complacent future, he'd destroy himself resisting it.

A chill passed through him, interrupting his thoughts. He looked back towards the village with a frown. Emerging from the inferno were three figures on horseback, riding slowly up the road, their thin, stretched shadows bracketed by flame. His drooping eye watered as he fought to make them out against the brightness, but the pressure gathering around his heart told him what his eyes couldn't.

It had been a long time since he'd seen a dreadknight, but he hadn't forgotten what it felt like to have them near.

Here at last, he thought, and a malicious smile touched the corner of his mouth. *Then it's only a matter of time, Aren of Shoal Point.*

2

‘Come on, bumblefoot!’ Fen yelled over her shoulder. ‘You call this a race?’

Aren wiped sweat-damp hair from his eyes and grinned as he laboured up the rocky slope behind her. Small animals scattered into the brush at their approach. It was the grey hour before the dawn, and overhead an eagle cut curves in the sky.

‘Getting tired yet?’ Fen hollered. ‘Hurry, or we’ll miss it!’

Aren didn’t reply. Let her waste her breath. They both knew he was no match for her over long distances. A life spent outdoors had given her a level of stamina he couldn’t compete with.

But racing was about more than stamina; it was also about tactics.

He’d been dragging his feet the whole way up the hill, saving energy while he waited for his chance. Fen had been forced to slow to his pace. There was no fun in thrashing him; she wanted to stay within taunting range. All the time he’d been alert for an opportunity, and now, at last, he saw one.

Ahead, the slope ran up against a low cliff, and the way twisted sharply left behind a rocky outcrop before switching back on itself. At the top of the cliff was an area of open ground leading to a narrow gap between two hunched shoulders of stone. That gap was the choke point. It wasn’t wide enough for both of them. If he could get there first, he’d have a chance of beating her to the top.

Fen ran behind the outcrop, following the folds in the land. The moment she was out of sight, Aren accelerated, sprinting as fast as

he could for the cliff. Let Fen go the long way around. He'd take the shortcut: straight up.

He reached the cliff and began to climb. He'd grown up around cliffs, in a coastal town, and scaled dozens as a boy. This one was no challenge, and he took it at a reckless pace. He was halfway up before Fen looked back and spotted him. With an outraged curse, she redoubled her speed. There'd be no slowing down for him now. The real race was on.

Loose scree slid beneath his boots as he clambered over the lip of the cliff and ran for the gap. From the corner of his eye he saw Fen closing the distance, racing towards it from the other direction. He put everything he had into his legs, powering himself forward, but at the last instant she darted in front of him with a yell of triumph.

He grabbed her shoulder and hauled her roughly back, muscling through the gap first. She might be faster, but he was stronger.

'You cheat!' she accused, but she was laughing as she said it. She crowded in close behind as they scrambled up the steep gully. Aren made himself big, blocking her, and she all but clambered up his back in her attempts to get by. As they came out of the gully she tripped and stumbled, sliding off him as he broke away. Before him was a clear run over scrub ground to the ridge that was the finish line. Arms pumping, he went for it. If he could get enough of a head start before Fen got up, he could beat her.

A sharp yelp from behind pulled him up short. He looked over his shoulder to see Fen hopping on one leg, clutching at the back of the other. She made it a few feet and went down on her hands and knees, face screwed up in a grimace.

'Fen?' He was already starting down the hill.

'My leg,' she said through gritted teeth. 'Felt like a cord snapping. Joha, it really hurts.'

He put his arm around her shoulders to help her up. She balanced against him, standing on her good leg, the other held just off the ground, eyes closed as she breathed through the pain.

'I always did have bad timing,' she said, in a brave attempt at humour.

'We should get you back to the camp. Vika can help.'

‘No. I wanted to show you. That’s why we came up here.’

‘Fen, you’re hurt.’

‘Help me up to the ridge. If we’re quick, we can still make it.’

Aren gave her a dubious look. ‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes. Just hurry.’

‘Can you put any weight on it?’

‘I’ll try,’ she said. Gingerly, she lowered her foot to the ground, her mouth in a tight line.

‘Is it alright?’ he asked.

Her expression cleared. ‘It’s fine,’ she said brightly, and bolted away from him.

Aren let out a strangled howl of outrage as he realised he’d been duped, and took to his heels in pursuit. But though he ran as hard as he could manage, he couldn’t catch her now. By the time he caught up she was at the summit, panting and grinning.

‘That,’ he gasped, ‘was dirty.’

‘You nearly pulled me over getting through that gap!’

‘You should have climbed the cliff, then.’

‘You know how I feel about heights.’

‘“To overcome your enemy, you must first understand them,”’ Aren said sagely. It was a favourite quote of his, learned from his tutor in the fighting arts back in Shoal Point.

‘Exactly,’ she replied. ‘Which is how I knew you wouldn’t leave me behind.’ She straightened up, hands on her lower back, and looked off into the distance. ‘Come here. You have to see this.’

They found a spot on a rock and sat side by side, passing a waterskin between them. From their vantage point they could see for leagues in every direction. As the tiredness seeped from his muscles, Aren looked out at the immense, empty world of the Reaches with slowly growing awe.

Lyssa was alone in the west, a bruised pearl in the brightening sky. She was his mother’s moon, with whom she’d shared her name. She hung low over a broken horizon, above a vast land of grass and rock, plateaus and ravines, jigsawed by ancient cataclysm. He heard a piercing call and saw the eagle again, gliding along the line of an escarpment that rose sheer and sudden from the earth.

Atop the escarpment was a strange rock formation, like a line of shattered teeth, overgrown and crumbling.

‘What’s that?’ he asked Fen, pointing. She could read the land in a way he found mystifying.

She looked. ‘It was a wall, once,’ she said.

Aren frowned. If it was a wall, it was so old it had been absorbed by the landscape. Either perspective was playing tricks, or it had once been enormous.

Fen caught his thought. ‘Giants lived here, before the Long Ice.’

Aren felt a chill: the shadow of ages passing over him. The ruins of the Second Empire could be found all over Ossia, a constant reminder of his people’s faded glory, but the wild north held memories more ancient still. Here was a relic from a time before recorded history, before the Aspects were ever worshipped, before the Six Races came to be.

‘Here it is!’ Fen said, grabbing his wrist in excitement. ‘Look!’ And she turned her head to the east as dawn spilled light across the sundered land, carved into misty beams by the hills and ridges.

Aren didn’t look. It wasn’t the Reaches that had captured his eye but her face, lit by the sun and a childlike, peaceful wonder he’d never seen before. Her freckles made a map of her skin, clustered so thickly they formed a continent across her cheeks. She was green-eyed and ginger, her hair gathered in a loose ponytail. Entranced by the light, she entranced him in turn, and he couldn’t take his gaze from her.

These past few years had been hard on them all. After the destruction of Hammerholt, they’d become the most wanted people in Ossia. Wherever they went, they brought news of the Ember Blade and left hope in their wake; but the Iron Hand were always close behind them and they never dared stop for long. Their days had been spent in a succession of hideaways and safehouses, dogged by the relentless enemy, worn down by paranoia and fear of betrayal.

The only constant had been each other, those dedicated few who’d taken up the mantle of the Dawnwardens, and until recently Fen had been the only one close to Aren’s age. Though she was still guarded and cold with strangers, time and trust had broken the

barriers between them, and there was nobody she laughed with or confided in so readily. She was his best friend and his closest companion.

He also thought he might be in love with her.

‘My da used to call it the daily miracle,’ she said faintly.

Her voice jerked him out of his reverie, and he looked away before she could catch him staring. Now he saw the land painted with the first colours of day, and realised what was happening here. She was sharing it with him. The dawn was hers, had *always* been hers, but today she was giving it to him.

Warmth bloomed in his chest at the thought. He was seized by the urge to take her hand, to hold it as they watched the sun rise together. If there was any time to do it, surely now? His fingers reached for hers as though drawn there.

‘Just at this moment ...’ she murmured. ‘Just *this*, when there’s only me and the sun ...’ A smile touched the edge of her mouth. ‘It’s like there’s no one else in the world.’

Aren felt something sink inside him, and he took his hand back before it could be noticed. *No one else in the world*. Could there be any clearer signal? There was no one so perfectly equipped to be alone as Fen. He’d misread her, allowed himself to believe that this was something more than it was. He didn’t want to think what might have happened if their hands had touched, if she’d seen what was in his eyes and found it unwelcome. The damage done would have been irreparable. How selfish of him to risk their friendship that way, how foolish.

She sighed to herself in contentment. Whatever sacred touch she felt from the dawn had passed now, and she glanced at him to see if he’d felt something, too. He gave her a smile, but he couldn’t make it real, and he saw a flicker of disappointment in her eyes.

She’s your friend, thought Aren. *She’s your best friend. That’s enough.*

They sat together in silence watching the sun rise, and as the time passed Aren gradually regained an even keel, enough that he could smile and mean it.

‘It really is beautiful,’ he said at last.

‘They’ll never have it,’ said Fen, venom creeping into her voice. ‘They can walk their boots over it, but it’ll never be theirs.’

‘No,’ said Aren. ‘It never will.’

She handed him a whittling knife, still in its sheath. ‘I made you this,’ she said. ‘For your birthday.’

‘But ... it’s *my* birthday, not yours,’ Aren said in puzzlement.

‘I know,’ she said. ‘But you grew up Krodan, getting gifts instead of giving them.’

‘I’ll admit, I do miss that part,’ he said wryly, and drew the knife. It fitted his palm well, and the blade shone as he held it up to the sun.

‘I made the handle from an antler of that stag you killed,’ she said. ‘The one time you actually hit anything.’

‘I doubt it was *my* arrow that killed it,’ he said. ‘Since one was in its hindquarters and the other in its heart.’

‘Ah, but who knows whose was whose? Look: it has your name in druidsign on the sheath. Vika helped me.’

‘Treasonous,’ Aren said approvingly, studying the line of strange, crabbed marks.

‘Thought you’d like that. Still, you’re probably safe from the gallows. Vika assures me no Krodan would ever recognise it, even if they saw it.’

‘Well, that’s a relief.’ He sheathed the knife, put it in his pocket and smiled at her. Everything was well between them again. ‘Thank you, Fen. I love it.’

‘Learn to carve something I can recognise. That’ll be thanks enough.’ She got to her feet and dusted the grit off her trousers. ‘Now ... race you back? Unless your knees have failed you already, old man?’

‘I’m nineteen, not ninety!’ he complained, but she was already off down the hill. ‘I’m not racing you!’ he called after her.

But of course, he did anyway, and lost.