Wayward winds had stirred the dust into the air earlier that day, and all who came into Ehrlitan’s eastern inland gate were coated, clothes and skin, with the colour of the red sandstone hills. Merchants, pilgrims, drovers and travellers appeared before the guards as if conjured, one after another, from the swirling haze, heads bent as they trudged into the gate’s lee, eyes slitted behind folds of stained linen. Rust-sheathed goats stumbled after the drovers, horses and oxen arrived with drooped heads and rings of gritty crust around their nostrils and eyes, wagons hissed as sand sifted down between weathered boards in the beds. The guards watched on, thinking only of the end of their watch, and the baths, meals and warm bodies that would follow as proper reward for duties upheld.

The woman who came in on foot was noted, but for all the wrong reasons. Sheathed in tight silks, head wrapped and face hidden beneath a scarf, she was nonetheless worth a second glance, if only for the grace of her stride and the sway of her hips. The guards, being men and slavish to their imaginations, provided the rest.

She noted their momentary attention and understood it well enough to be unconcerned. More problematic had one or both of the guards been female. They might well have wondered that she was entering the city by this particular gate, having come down, on foot, this particular road, which wound league upon league through parched, virtually lifeless hills, then ran parallel to a mostly uninhabited scrub forest for yet more leagues. An arrival, then, made still more unusual since she was carrying no supplies, and the supple leather of her moccasins was barely worn. Had the guards been female, they would have accosted her, and she would have faced some hard questions, none of which she was prepared to answer truthfully.

Fortunate for the guards, then, that they had been male. Fortunate, too, the delicious lure of a man’s imagination as those gazes followed her into the street, empty of suspicion yet feverishly disrobing her curved form with every swing of her hips, a motion she only marginally exaggerated.

Coming to an intersection she turned left and moments later was past their lines of sight. The wind was blunted here in the city, although fine dust continued to drift down to coat all in a monochrome powder. The woman continued through the crowds, her route a gradual, inward spiral towards the Jen’rahb, Ehrlitan’s central tel, the vast multilayered ruin inhabited by little more than vermin, of both the four-legged and two-legged kind. Arriving at last within sight of the collapsed buildings, she found a nearby inn, modest in presentation and without ambition to be other than a local establishment housing a few whores in the second-floor rooms and a dozen or so regulars in the ground-floor tavern.

Beside the tavern’s entrance was an arched passage leading into a small garden. The woman stepped into that passage to brush the dust from her clothing, then walked on to the shallow basin of silty water beneath a desultorily trickling fountain, where she unwound the scarf and splashed her face, sufficient to take the sting from her eyes.

Returning through the passage, the woman then entered the tavern.
Gloomy, the smoke from fires, oil lanterns, durhang, iteralbe and rustleaf drifting beneath the low plaster ceiling, three-quarters full and all of the tables occupied. A youth had preceded her by a few moments, and was now breathlessly expounding on some adventure barely survived. Noting this as she walked past the young man and his listeners, the woman allowed herself a faint smile that was, perhaps, sadder than she had intended.

She found a place at the bar and beckoned the tender over. He stopped opposite and studied her intently while she ordered, in unaccented Ehrlii, a bottle of rice wine. At her request he reached under the counter and she heard the clink of bottles as he said, in Malazan, ‘Hope you’re not expecting anything worth the name, lass.’ He straightened, brushing dust from a clay bottle then peering at the stopper. ‘This one’s at least still sealed.’

‘That will do,’ she said, still speaking the local dialect, laying out on the bar-top three silver crescents.

‘Plan on drinking all of it?’
‘I’d need a room upstairs to crawl into,’ she replied, tugging the stopper free as the barman set down a tin goblet. ‘One with a lock,’ she added.

‘Then Oponn’s smiling on you,’ he said. ‘One’s just become available.’
‘Good.’
‘You attached to Dujek’s army?’ the man asked.
She poured out a full draught of the amber, somewhat cloudy wine. ‘No. Why, is it here?’
‘Tail ends,’ he replied. ‘The main body marched out six days ago. Left a garrison, of course. That’s why I was wondering—’
‘I belong to no army.’
Her tone, strangely cold and flat, silenced him. Moments later, he drifted away to attend to another customer.

She drank. Steadily working through the bottle as the light faded outside, and the tavern grew yet more crowded, voices getting louder, elbows and shoulders jostling against her more often than was entirely necessary. She ignored the casual groping, eyes on the liquid in the goblet before her.

At last she was done, and so she turned about and threaded her way, unsteadily, through the press of bodies to arrive finally at the stairs. She made her ascent cautiously, one hand on the flimsy railing, vaguely aware that someone was, unsurprisingly, following her.

At the landing she set her back against a wall.
The stranger arrived, still wearing a stupid grin—that froze on his face as the point of a knife pressed the skin beneath his left eye.
‘Go back downstairs,’ the woman said.
A tear of blood trickled down the man’s cheek, gathered thick along the ridge of his jaw. He was trembling, wincing as the point slipped in ever deeper. ‘Please,’ he whispered.
She reeled slightly, inadvertently slicing open the man’s cheek, fortunately downward rather than up into his eye. He cried out and staggered back, hands up in an effort to stop the flow of blood, then stumbled his way down the stairs. Shouts from below, then a harsh laugh.
The woman studied the knife in her hand, wondering where it had come from, and whose blood now gleamed from it.

No matter.
She went in search of her room, and, eventually, found it.

* * * * *

The vast dust storm was natural, born out on the Jhag Odhan and cycling widdershins into the heart of the Seven Cities subcontinent. The winds swept northward along the east side of the hills, crags and old mountains ringing the Holy Desert of Raraku—a desert that was now a sea—and were drawn into a war of lightning along the ridge’s breadth, visible from the cities of Pan’potsun and G’danisban. Wheeling westward, the storm spun out writhing arms, one of these striking Ehrlitan before blowing out above the Ehrlitan Sea, another reaching to the city of Pur Atrii. As the main body of the storm curled back inland, it gathered energy once more, battering the north side of the Thalas Mountains, engulfing the cities of Hatra and Y’Ghatan before turning southward one last time. A natural storm, one final gift, perhaps, from the old spirits of Raraku.

The fleeing army of Leoman of the Flails had embraced that gift, riding into that relentless wind for days on end, the days stretching into weeks, the world beyond reduced to a wall of suspended sand all the more bitter for what it reminded the survivors of—their beloved Whirlwind, the hammer of Sha’ik and Dryjhna the Apocalyptic. Yet, even in bitterness, there was life, there was salvation.

Tavore’s Malazan army still pursued, not in haste, not with the reckless stupidity shown immediately following the death of Sha’ik and the shattering of the rebellion. Now, the hunt was a measured thing, a tactical stalking of the last organized force opposed to the empire. A force believed to be in possession of the Holy Book of Dryjhna, the lone artifact of hope for the embattled rebels of Seven Cities.

Though he possessed it not, Leoman of the Flails cursed that book daily. With almost religious zeal and appalling imagination, he growled out his curses, the rasping wind thankfully stripping the words away so that only Corabb Bhilan Thenu’alas, riding close alongside his commander, could hear. When tiring of that tirade, Leoman would concoct elaborate schemes to destroy the tome once it came into his hands. Fire, horse piss, bile, Moranth incendiaries, the belly of a dragon . . . until Corabb, exhausted, pulled away to ride in the more reasonable company of his fellow rebels.

Who would then ply him with fearful questions, casting uneasy glances Leoman’s way. What was he saying?

Prayers, Corabb would answer. Our commander prays to Dryjhna all day. Leoman of the Flails, he told them, is a pious man.

About as pious as could be expected. The rebellion was collapsing, whipped away on the winds. Cities had capitulated, one after another, upon the appearance of imperial armies and ships. Citizens turned on neighbours in their zeal to present criminals to answer for the multitude of atrocities committed during the uprising. Once-heroes and petty tyrants alike were paraded before the reoccupiers, and bloodlust was high. Such grim news reached them from caravans they intercepted as they fled ever onward. And
with each tatter of news, Leoman’s expression darkened yet further, as if it was all he could do to bind taut the rage within him.

It was disappointment, Corabb told himself, punctuating the thought each time with a long sigh. The people of Seven Cities so quickly relinquished the freedom won at the cost of so many lives, and this was indeed a bitter truth, a most sordid comment on human nature. Had it all been for nothing, then? How could a pious warrior not experience soul-burning disappointment? How many tens of thousands of people had died? For what?

And so Corabb told himself he understood his commander. Understood that Leoman could not let go, not yet, perhaps never. Holding fast to the dream gave meaning to all that had gone before.

Complicated thoughts. It had taken Corabb many hours of frowning regard to reach them, to make that extraordinary leap into the mind of another man, to see through his eyes, if only for a moment, before reeling back in humble confusion. He had caught a glimpse, then, of what made great leaders, in battle, in matters of state. The facility of their intelligence in shifting perspectives, in seeing things from all sides. When, for Corabb, it was all he could manage, truth be told, to cling to a single vision—his own—in the midst of so much discord as the world was wont to rear up before him.

If not for his commander, Corabb well knew, he would be lost.

A gloved hand, gesturing, and Corabb kicked his mount forward until he was at Leoman’s side.

The hooded, cloth-wrapped face swung close, leather-clad fingers tugging the stained silk away from the mouth, and words shouted so that Corabb could hear them: ‘Where in Hood’s name are we?’

Corabb stared, squinted, then sighed.

Her finger provided the drama, ploughing a traumatic furrow across the well-worn path. The ants scurried in confusion, and Samar Dev watched them scrabbling fierce with the insult, the soldiers with their heads lifted and mandibles opened wide as if they would challenge the gods. Or, in this case, a woman slowly dying of thirst.

She was lying on her side in the shade of the wagon. It was just past midday, and the air was still. The heat had stolen all strength from her limbs. It was unlikely she could continue her assault on the ants, and the realization gave her a moment of regret. The deliverance of discord into otherwise predictable, truncated and sordid lives seemed a worthwhile thing. Well, perhaps not worthwhile, but certainly interesting. God-like thoughts, then, to mark her last day among the living.

Motion caught her attention. The dust of the road, shivering, and now she could hear a growing thunder, reverberating like earthen drums. The track she was on was not a well-traversed one here on the Ugarat Odhan. It belonged to an age long past, when the caravans plied the scores of routes between the dozen or more great cities of which ancient Ugarat was the hub, and all those cities, barring Kayhum on the banks of the river and Ugarat itself, were dead a thousand years or more.

Still, a lone rider could as easily be one too many as her salvation, for she was a woman with ample womanly charms, and she was alone. Sometimes, it was said, bandits and raiders used these mostly forgotten tracks as they made their way between caravan routes. Bandits were notoriously ungenerous.
The hoofs approached, ever louder, then the creature slowed, and a moment later a sultry cloud of dust rolled over Samar Dev. The horse snorted, a strangely vicious sound, and there was a softer thud as the rider slipped down. Faint footfalls drew nearer.

What was this? A child? A woman?
A shadow slid into view beyond that cast by the wagon, and Samar Dev rolled her head, watching as the figure strode round the wagon and looked down on her.
No, neither child nor woman. Perhaps, she considered, not even a man. An apparition, tattered white fur riding the impossibly broad shoulders. A sword of flaked flint strapped to his back, the grip wrapped in hide. She blinked hard, seeking more details, but the bright sky behind him defeated her. A giant of a man who walked quiet as a desert cat, a nightmare vision, a hallucination.
And then he spoke, but not, it was clear, to her. ‘You shall have to wait for your meal, Havok. This one still lives.’
‘Havok eats dead women?’ Samar asked, her voice ragged. ‘Who do you ride with?’
‘Not with,’ the giant replied. ‘On.’ He moved closer and crouched down beside her. There was something in his hands—a waterskin—but she found she could not pull her gaze from his face. Even, hard-edged features, broken and crazed by a tattoo of shattered glass, the mark of an escaped slave. ‘I see your wagon,’ he said, speaking the language of the desert tribes yet oddly accented, ‘but where is the beast that pulled it?’

‘In the bed,’ she replied.
He set the skin at her side and straightened, walked over and leaned in for a look. ‘There’s a dead man in there.’
‘Yes, that’s him. He’s broken down.’
‘He was pulling this wagon? No wonder he’s dead.’
She reached over and managed to close both hands around the waterskin’s neck. Tugged the stopper free and tilted it over her mouth. Warm, delicious water. ‘Do you see those double levers beside him?’ she asked. ‘Work those and the wagon moves. It’s my own invention.’
‘Is it hard work? Then why hire an old man to do it?’
‘He was a potential investor. Wanted to see how it would work for himself.’
The giant grunted, and she saw him studying her. ‘We were doing fine,’ she said. ‘At first. But then it broke. The linkage. We were only planning half a day, but he’d taken us too far out before dropping dead. I thought to walk, but then I broke my foot—’
‘How?’
‘Kicking the wheel. Anyway, I can’t walk.’
He continued staring down at her, like a wolf eyeing a lame hare. She sipped more water. ‘Are you planning on being unpleasant?’ she asked.
‘It is blood-oil that drives a Teblor warrior to rape. I have none. I have not taken a woman by force in years. You are from Ugarat?’
‘Yes.’
‘I must enter that city for supplies. I want no trouble.’
‘I can help with that.’
‘I want to remain beneath notice.’
‘I’m not sure that’s possible,’ she said.
‘Make it possible and I will take you with me.’
‘Well, that’s not fair. You are half again taller than a normal man. You are tattooed. You have a horse that eats people—assuming it is a horse and not an enkar’al. And you seem to be wearing the skin of a white-furred bear.’
He turned away from the wagon.
‘All right!’ she said hastily. ‘I’ll think of something.’
He came close again, collected the waterskin, slung it over a shoulder, and then picked her up by the belt, one-handed. Pain ripped through her right leg as the broken foot dangled. ‘Seven Hounds!’ she hissed. ‘How undignified do you have to make this?’
Saying nothing, the warrior carried her over to his waiting horse. Not an enkar’al, she saw, but not quite a horse either. Tall, lean and pallid, silver mane and tail, with eyes red as blood. A single rein, no saddle or stirrups. ‘Stand on your good leg,’ he said, lifting her straight. Then he picked up a loop of rope and vaulted onto the horse.
Gasping, leaning against the horse, Samar Dev tracked the double strands of the rope the man held, and saw that he had been dragging something while he rode. Two huge rotted heads. Dogs or bears, as oversized as the man himself.
The warrior reached down and unceremoniously pulled her up until she was settled behind him. More waves of pain, darkness threatening.
‘Beneath notice,’ he said again.
Samar Dev glanced back at those two severed heads. ‘That goes without saying,’ she said.