

blood. “Line it up.” The gauntlet was more used as a threat or a punishment than as a recruiting test—men were injured regularly, maimed often. But he had set his purpose towards work in Reach Antach. Fighting was the work he knew, and this was the only buyer of the labor of fighting men in the Reach.

“Damn fool,” said the Sergeant. “Go on to field six, and wait there.”

Whatever else this Reach army was, it was scarcely a welcoming place. For a moment, Cete considered turning around and leaving, taking his pack and heading on to Reach Tever or beyond, and leaving Antach to its fate.

But there was that mantle and the woman who made it. Cete was a rational man, but the glory of her work had trapped him like a boar in a pit. He went to field six, folded his cloak and tunic atop his pack, laid his axe beside it, sat himself down on the earth, and prayed.

Cete did not count himself a pious man, but this was a time for prayer. He said the war psalms, lost himself in the poetry, bathed in the fire of the living God. When the gauntlet was assembled, he was ready. He knew what he would do.

Cete stood, stretched, smelled the dirt in the summer air, looked across the field. There were two lines of men drawn up, holding bludgeons and blunted swords. They were young, and their cotton arming shirts were a clean



white, showing none of the ground-in rust that marked veterans. Too far apart for a proper gauntlet; they each wanted room to swing. They were almost all taller than him, and some were larger. Those he could see wore smiles, all broad white teeth. Cete held back his own smile.

There was a line drawn in the dirt between the two rows, and the sergeant was at the other end, all smiles as well. So many smiles; it was as though Sheavesday had come in summer. Cete could feel the blood pulsing in his neck, feel the shivering starting in his fingers. “Whenever you’re ready, old man,” said the sergeant.

“What are your rules?” asked Cete.

“Pretend to wear a merit chain, and you don’t know the gauntlet?” laughed the sergeant. “Rule is this—walk the line from one end to the other. That’s it. No other rules, no—”

Cete stepped forward. The first man on the left, holding an overseer’s truncheon, moved first. He was tall and broadly built, with a child’s face. The first man on the right was smaller, with pale, almost brown hair, and a neatly cropped beard. He held a practice sword, and he pulled it back to strike.

Cete grabbed the man with the truncheon by his elbow, pushing in close while the weapon was still raised, and punched him in the center of his chest at the same