

THE WARS OF LIGHT AND SHADOW VOLUME TWO

JANNY WURTS

The Ships of Merior



Voyager

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HarperCollins*Publishers*

***The Wars Of Light And Shadows:
Volume 2***

Dedication

To my husband,
Don Maitz,
with all my love;
for understanding of desperate, long deadlines
above and beyond the call of duty.
This one's for you.

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I. MISCREANT

On the morning the Fellowship sorcerer who had crowned the King at Ostermere fare northward on the old disused road, the five years of peace precariously reestablished since the carnage that followed the Mistwraith's defeat as yet showed no sign of breaking.

The moment seemed unlikely for happenstance to intrude and shape a spiralling succession of events to upend loyalties and kingdoms. Havish's coastal landscape with its jagged, shadowed valleys wore the mottled greens of late spring. Dew still spangled the leaf-tips, touched brilliant by early sunlight. Asandir rode in his shirtsleeves, the dark, silver-banded mantle lately worn for the royal coronation folded inside his saddle pack. Hair of the same fine silver blew uncovered in the gusts that whipped off the sea; that tossed the clumped bracken on the hill crests and fanned gorse against lichenized outcrops of quartz rock. The black stud who bore him strode hock-deep in grass, alone beneath cloudless sky. Wildflowers thrashed by its passage sweetened the air with perfume and the jaggling flight of disturbed bees.

For the first time in centuries of service, Asandir was solitary, and on an errand of no pressing urgency? The ruthless war, the upsets to rule and to trade that had savaged the north in the wake of the Mistwraith's imprisonment had settled, if not into the well-governed order secured for Havish, then at least into patterns that confined latent hatreds to the avenues of statecraft and politics. Better than most, Asandir knew the respite was fated not to last. His memories were bitter and hurtful, of the great curse cast by the Mistwraith to set both its captors at odds; the land's restoration to clear sky bought at a cost of two mortal destinies and the land's lasting peace.

Unless the Fellowship sorcerers could find means to break Desh-thiere's geas of hatred against the royal half-brothers whose gifts brought its bane, the freed sunlight that warmed the growing earth could yet be paid for in blood. With the restored throne of Havish firmly under its crowned heir, Asandir at last rode to join his colleagues in their effort to unbind the Mistwraith's two victims from the vicious throes of its vengeance.

Relaxed in rare contentment, too recently delivered from centuries of sunless damp to take the hale spring earth for granted, he let his spirit soar with the winds. The road he had chosen was years overgrown, little more than a crease that meandered through thorn and brushbrake to re-emerge where the growth was browsed close by deer. Despite the banished mists, the townsmen still held uneasy fears of open spaces, once the sites of forgotten mysteries. Northbound travellers innately preferred to book their passage by ship.

Untroubled by the after-presence of Paravian spirits, not at all disturbed by the foundations of ancient ruins that underlay the hammocks of wild roses, the sorcerer rode with his rein looped. He followed the way without misstep, guided by memories that predated the mo

weathered, broken wall. His appearance of reverie was deceptive. At each turn, his mag-
heightened senses resonated with the natural energies that surrounded him. The sun on his
shoulders became a benediction, both counterpoint and celebration to the ringing
reverberation that was light striking shadow off edges of wild stone.

When a dissonance snagged in the weave, reflex and habit snapped Asandir's complaisance.
His powers of perception tightened to trace the immediate cause.

Whatever bad news approached from the south, his mount's wary senses caught no sign.
The stallion snorted, shook out his mane, and let Asandir rein him over to the verge of the
trail. Long minutes later, a drum roll of galloping hooves startled the larks to songless flight.
When the messenger on his labouring mount hove into view, the sorcerer sat his saddle
frowning; while the stud, bored with waiting, cropped grass.

The courier wore royal colours, the distinctive scarlet tabard and gold hawk blazon of the
king's personal service snapped into creases against the breeze. No common message bearer
he owned the carriage of a champion fighter. But the battle-brash courage that graced his
reputation was missing as he hauled his horse to a prancing, head-shaking halt.

The man was a fool, who eagerly brought trouble to the ear of a Fellowship sorcerer.

Briskly annoyed, Asandir spoke before the king's rider could master his uncertainty.
'I know you were sent by your liege. If my spellbinder Dakar is cause and root of some
problem, I say now, as I told his Majesty and the realm's steward on my departure: there is
no possible difficulty that might stem from an apprentice's misdeeds that your High King's
justice cannot handle.'

The messenger nursed lathered reins to divert his eye-rolling mount from her sideward
crabsteps through the bracken. 'Begging pardon, Sorcerer. But Dakar got himself drunk. There
was a fight.' Sweating pale before Asandir's displeasure, he finished in a crisp rush. 'Your
spellbinder's got himself knifed and King Eldir's healers say he'll bleed to death.'

'Oh, indeed?' The words bit the quiet like sheared metal. Asandir's brows cocked up.
Features laced over with creases showed a moment of fierce surprise. Then he started his
black up from a mouthful of grass and spun him thundering back toward the city.

Alone in the derelict roadway on a sidling, race-bred horse, the royal courier had no mind
to linger. He was not clan kindred, to feel at ease in the wild places where the old stones lay
carved with uncanny patterns to snag and bewitch a man's thoughts. The instant his
overstrung mare quit her tussle with the bit, he nursed her along at a trot, relieved to be
spared the company of a sorcerer any right-thinking mortal knew better than to presume not
to fear.

The city known as the jewel of the southwest coast flung an ungainly sprawl of battlements
across the crown of a cove. Built over warrens of limestone caves once used as a smuggler's
haven, the architecture reflected twelve centuries of changing tastes, battered as much by
storms as by war, and bearing like layers in sediment the mismatched masonry of
refortifications and repairs. Sea trade provided the marrow of Ostermere's wealth. Walls of
tawny brick abutted bulwarks of native limestone, scabrous with moss and smothered in le-
aching facing crannies by salt-stunted runners of wild ivy. The whole overlooked a series of

weathered ledges that commanded a west-facing inlet, each tier crusted with half-timbered shops and slate-roofed mansions still gay with bunting and gold streamers from celebration of the king's accession. If the merchant galleys docked along the seaside gates no longer flew banners at their mastheads, if the guards by the harbourmaster's office had shed ceremonial accoutrements for boiled leather hauberks and plain steel, a charge of excitement yet lingered.

In all the realm, this city had been honoured as the royal seat until the walls at Telmand could be raised out of ruin and restored to the splendours of years past. An alertness like frost clung to the men hand-picked for the royal guard. Out of pride for their youthful sovereign they had the unused north postern winched open and the shanty market that encroached upon its bailey cleared of beggars and squatters' stalls when Asandir's stallion clattered through.

In a courtyard still gloomy under overhanging tenements, the sorcerer dismounted. He tossed his reins to a barefoot boy groom grown familiar with the stud through the months of change as town governance had been replaced by sovereign monarchy. Without pause for greeting, Asandir strode off, scattering geese and a loose pig from the puddled run-off by the wash house. He dodged through men in sweaty tunics who unloaded tuns from an ale draught, avoided a bucket-bearing scullion and crossed without mishap through the tumbling browbeaten melee of a deerhound bitch's cavorting pups.

Just arrived, all but brushed aside with the same brisk lack of ceremony, the captain of Ostermere's garrison pumped on fat legs to join the sorcerer. A capricious gust snatched his unbelted surcoat. Clutching scarlet broadcloth with both hands to escape getting muffled by his clothing, he relayed facts with a directness at odds with his untidy turnout.

'It was a damnfool accident, the Mad Prophet so drunken he could barely stand upright. He'd visited the kitchens to meet a maid he claimed he'd an assignation with. Muddled as he was, he kissed the wrong doxy. Her husband came in at just the right time to lose his temper. The city captain gave a one-handed shrug, his brows beetled over his beefy nose. 'The knife was handy on the butcher's block, and the wound-' Asandir cut him off. 'The details won't matter.' He reached the servants' postern, flung it open fast enough to whistle air, and added 'Your gate guards are missing their gold buttons.'

Ostermere's ranking captain swore. An unlikely, swordsman's agility allowed him to nip through the fast-closing panel. 'The meatbrains got themselves fleeced at dice. Not a man of them will own up, but since you ask, there were bystanders who fingered Dakar as the instigator.'

'I thought so.' Light through an ancient arrow-slit sliced across Asandir's shoulders as he traversed the corridor behind the pantries and began in long strides to climb stairs. Instructions trailed echoing behind him. 'Inform your royal liege I'm here. Ask if he'll please attend me at once in Dakar's bedchamber.'

Dismissed with one foot raised to mount an empty landing, the city captain spun about. 'Ask my liege, indeed! I know a command when I hear one. And I'd beg on my knees for Dharkaron Avenger's own judgement before I'd shift places with Dakar.'

From far above, Asandir's voice cracked back in crisp reverberation. 'For the Mad Prophet's transgressions this time, Dharkaron's judgement would be too merciful.'

High-browed, intelligent, and shrewdly even-tempered for a lad of eighteen years, King Eldir arrived in a state of disarray as striking as his ranking captain's. Swiping back tousled brown hair, sweat-damp from a running ascent of several flights of tower stairs, he heaved off cloak, sash and tabard, and shed a gold-trimmed load of state velvets without apology onto a bench in a lover's nook. In just dread of Asandir's inquiry, he jerked down the tails of an undertunic threadbare enough to have belonged to an apprentice labourer and mouthed exasperated excuses to himself. 'I'm sorry. But the drawers the tailors' guild sent had enough ties and eyelets to corset a whore, and too much lace makes me itch.'

Eldir broke off, embarrassed. The sorcerer he hastened to meet was not attending his injured charge, but standing stone-still in the hallway, one shoulder braced against the doorjamb and his face bent into shadow.

The young king paled in dismay. 'Ath's mercy! We reached you too late to help.'

Asandir glanced up, eyes bright. 'Certainly not.' He inclined his head toward the door. Muffled voices issued from the other side, one male and laboured, another one female bewailing misfortune in lisping sympathy.

Eldir's interest quickened. Even in extremis, it appeared the infamous Mad Prophet had pursued his ill-starred assignation. Then, practical enough to restrain his wild thoughts, Havish's sovereign sighed in disappointment. 'You've healed him already, I see.'

The sorcerer shook his head. Dire as oncoming storm, he spun in the corridor, tripped the latch without noise and barged into Dakar's bedchamber.

The panel opened to reveal a pleasant, sunwashed alcove, cushioned chairs carved with grape clusters, and a feather mattress piled with quilts. The casement admitted a flood of ocean air lightly tainted by the tar the chandlers sold to black rigging. Swathed like a sausage in eiderdown, a chubby man lay with a face wan as bread dough and a beard like the curled fringe on a water-spaniel. Caught leaning over to kiss him, the pretty blonde kitchen maid with the knife-wielding husband murmured into his ear, 'I will grieve for you and pray to Ath to preserve your undying memory.'

'Which won't be the least bit necessary!' Asandir cracked from his planted stance by the doorway.

At his shoulder, Eldir started.

The maid snapped erect with a squeal and the quilts jerked, the victim beneath galvanized to a fish-flop start of surprise. A fondling hand recoiled from under a froth of lace petticoat as Dakar swivelled cinnamon eyes, widened now to rolling rings of white.

The tableau endured a frozen moment. Already pale, the sorcerer's wounded apprentice gasped a bitten-off curse, then to outward appearance fell comatose.

'Out!' Asandir jerked his chin toward the girl, who cast aside dignity, gathered her skirts above her knees and fled trailing unlaced furbelows.

As her footsteps dwindled down the corridor, the sorcerer kicked the door closed. A paralysed stillness descended, against which the rumble of ale tuns over cobbles seemed to thunder off the courtyard walls outside. Beyond the opened shutter, the call of the changing watch drifted off the wall walks, mingled with the bellow of the baker's oaths as he collared

a laggard scullion. The yap of gambolling puppies, the grind of wagons across Osterme market and the screeing cries of scavenging gulls seemed unreal, even dreamlike, before the stark tension in the room.

Asandir first addressed the king, who waited, frowning thoughtfully. 'Although I ask that the secrets of mages be kept from common knowledge in your court, I would have you understand just how far my apprentice has misled you.' He stepped to Dakar's bedside and with no shred of solicitude, ripped away quilting and sheets.

Dakar bit his lip, poker stiff, while his master yanked off the sodden dressing that swaddled the side the baking girl's husband had punctured.

The linen came free, gory as any bandage might be if pulled untimely from a mortal wound. Except the flesh beneath was unmarked.

King Eldir gaped in surprise.

Dakar,' Asandir informed, 'is this day five hundred and eighty-seven years old. He has longevity training. As you see, the suffering of wounds and illness is entirely within his powers to mend.'

'He was in no danger,' Eldir stated in rising, incredulous fury. He folded his arms, head tipped sideways, while skin smudged with the first shaved trace of a beard deepened to a violent, fresh flush. That moment, he needed no crown to lend him majesty. 'For whom, the realm's champion was sent out and told to run my fastest mare to death to fetch your master?'

Naked and pink and far too corpulent to cower into a feather mattress, Dakar shoved stubby hands in the hair at his temples. He licked dry lips, flinched from Asandir and squirmed. 'I'm sorry.' His shrug was less charming than desperate.

'Were you my subject, I'd have your life.' Eldir flicked a glance at the sorcerer, whose eyes were like butcher's steel fresh from the whetstone. 'Since you're not my feal man, regretfully I can't offer that kindness.'

Sweat rolled through Dakar's fingers and snaked across his plump wrists. His breathing came now in jerks, while lard at his knees jumped and quivered.

Eldir inclined his head toward Asandir. 'Perhaps I should wait for you without?' Mindful of his dignity, he side-stepped toward the door.

Alone and defenceless before his master, Dakar covered his face. Through his palms, he said, 'Ath! If it's to be tracing mazes through sand grains again, for mercy, get on with your traps and be done with me.'

That wasn't what I had in mind.' Asandir advanced to the bedside. He said something almost too soft to hear, cut by a wild, ragged cry from Dakar that trailed off to snivelling then silence.

Eldir rushed his step to shut the door. But the panel was caught short before it slammed and Asandir stepped through. He set the latch with steady fingers, turned around to regard the King of Havish, and said succinctly, 'Nightmares. They should occupy the Mad Prophet at least until sundown. He'll emerge hungry, and I sadly fear, not in the least bit chastened. Between one breath and the next, the sorcerer recovered his humour. 'Do I owe you for mo

than your guardsmen's allotment of gold buttons?'

'Not me.' Eldir sighed, strain and uncertainty returned to pull at the corners of his mouth. 'The oldest son of the town seneschal staked his mother's jewellery on bad cards, and I'm not sure exactly who started the dare. But the cook's fattened hog escaped its pen. The creature wound up in a warehouse and spoiled the raw wool consigned for the dyers at Narms. Truth to tell, the guild master's council of Ostermere is howling for Dakar's blood. My guard captain held orders to clap him in chains when the fight broke out in the kitchen.'

'I leave my apprentice to protect you for one day and find you exhausted by a hard lesson in diplomacy.' Asandir's grin flashed like a burst of sudden sunlight. He laid a steering hand on the royal shoulder and started off down the corridor. 'From this moment, consider my apprentice removed from the realm's concerns. Your steward Machiel should be able to guarantee your safety well enough, since you've managed to hold Havish secure through Dakar's irresponsible worst. I've decided exactly what I shall do with our errant prophet and I doubt he takes it well.'

'You'd punish him further?' The habits of an unassuming boyhood still with him, Eldir paused by the window-seat to gather his discarded state finery. 'What could be worse than harrowing the man with uninterrupted bad dreams?'

'Very little.' Asandir's eyes gleamed with sharp irony. 'When Dakar awakens, you will send him from court on a travelling allowance I'll leave for his reassignment. Tell him his task is to keep Prince Arithon of Rathain from getting murdered by Etarra's new division of field troops.'

Eldir stopped cold in the corridor. After five years, accounts were still repeated of the bloody war that had slaughtered two thirds of Etarra's garrison and left the northern clansmen feal to Arithon nearly decimated in the cause of defending his life. Motivated by a feud between half-brothers embroiled in bitter enmity; lent deadly stakes by the same power of sorcery that had once defeated the Mistwraith; and fanned hotter by age-old friction standing elsewhere between clanborn and townsman, the conflict had since brought the unified opposition of every merchant city in Rathain. The prince with blood-right to rule there was a marked and hunted man. Every trade guild within his own borders was eager to skewer him in cold blood.

Havish's emphatically neutral sovereign made a sound between a cough and a grunt as he considered Dakar's penchant for trouble appended to the man called Master of Shadow, the half of the north wanted dead. 'I shouldn't presume to advise, but isn't that fairly begging for to get Rathain a killed prince?'

'So one might think,' Asandir mused, not in the least bit concerned. 'Except Arithon's Ffalenn needs none of Dakar's help just now. On the contrary, he's perhaps the one man alive who may be capable of holding the Mad Prophet to heel. The match should prove engagingly fascinating. Each man holds the other in the utmost of scorn and contempt.'

Petition

The next event in the widening chain of happenstance provoked by the Mistwraith's ban arose at full summer, when visitors from Rathain's clan survivors sought audience with another high chieftain in the neighbouring realm to the west. Hailed as she knelt on damp pine needles in the midst of dressing out a deer, Lady Maenalle bent a hawk-sharp gaze on the breathless messenger.

'Fatemaster's justice, why now?' Bloodied to the wrists, her knife poised over a welter of steaming entrails, the woman who also shouldered the power of Tysan's regency shoved up from her knees with a quickness that belied her sixty years. Feet straddled over the half-gutted carcass, the man's leathers she preferred for daily wear belted to a waist still whipcord-trim, Maenalle pushed back close-cropped hair with the back of her least sticky wrist. She said to the boy who had jogged up a mountainside to fetch her, 'Speak clearly. These aren't the usual clan spokesmen we've received from Rathain before?'

'Lady, not this time.' Sure her displeasure boded ill for the scouts, whose advance word now seemed negligently scant on facts, the boy answered fast. 'The company numbers fifteen, led by a tall man named Red-beard. His war captain Caolle travels with him.'

'*Jieret* Red-beard? The young s'Valerient heir?' Grim in dismay, Maenalle cast a bothered glance over her gore-spattered leathers. 'But he's Deshir's chieftain, and Earl of the North!'

A state delegation from across the water, no less; and led by Prince Arithon's blood-pacted liegeman, who happened also to be *caithdein*, or 'shadow behind the throne', hereditary warden of Rathain. Maenalle let fly a blistering oath.

Then, infected by spurious, private triumph, for she despised formality and skirts, she burst into deep-throated laughter. 'Well, they'll just have to take me as I am,' she ended with a lift of dark eyebrows. 'I've got time to find a stream to sluice off? Good. The hunting party's on down the gorge. Somebody ought to go after them and let my grandson know what's afoot. She bit her lip, recalled to the deer, too sorely needed to abandon for scavengers to pick.

The young messenger offered to take the knife in her stead. 'Lady, I can finish up the butchering.'

Maenalle smiled. 'Good lad. I thought so, but really, this should be Maie's problem.'

Her moods were fair-minded enough to let the boy relax. 'Lady, if you both meet Prince Arithon's delegation reeking of offal, s'Gannley might be called out for insult.'

'Imp.' Maenalle relinquished her fouled blade and took a swipe at the child's ear, which he ducked before he got blood-smearred. 'Titles aside, Rathain's warden is very little older than you are. If he cries insult, I'll ask his war captain to cut down a birch switch and thrash him.'

Which words seemed a fine and suitable retort, until Maenalle's descent from the forested plateau forced an interval for sober thought. Chilled by the premature twilight of an afternoon cut off from sunlight, she entered the hidden ravine that held her clans' summer refuge. In silence, she numbered the years that had slipped past, all unnoticed. Red-beard was not a childish nickname. *Jieret* s'Valerient in sober fact was but one season older than Maie, no boy any more, if not yet fully a man.

Small wonder the young scout had stifled his smile at her mention of birch canes and thrashing.

Hatefully tired of acting the querulous ruler, and greeting nobody she passed, Maenalle crossed the dusty compound with its stinks of sun-curing hide. She barged into the comfortless hut that served as her quarters, flicked up cuffs still dripping from her stream-side ablutions and slammed back the lid of her clothes trunk.

Her hand hesitated over the folded finery inside, then snatched in sharp resolve: not the indigo regent's tabard with its glittering gold star blazon. Instead Maenalle shook out a plain black overtunic, expensively cut, and worn but once since its making. She would don the *caithdein's* sable, by tradition the symbol of power deferred in the presence of her true-born sovereign.

If she still held the regency in Tysan, the office was not hers by choice; the s'Illessid scion forepromised by prophecy had returned to claim his royal title. But the Mistwraith he had lent his gift of light to help subdue had avenged itself and cursed Prince Lysaer of Tysan for undying enmity against Arithon, Master of Shadow. For that, the Fellowship sorcerers entitled to crown him had withheld their sanction for his inheritance. Grieved beyond heartbreak for the betrayals which had forced their judgement, the realm's lady steward tugged the dark garment over her dampened leathers. She belted on her sword, firm in the one defiance. Let black cloth remind the envoy sent by Arithon of Rathain that the final call on clan loyalty in Tysan was not fully hers to command, however desperate the cause that surely came here to plead.

A brisk knock jostled her doorpanel. Maenalle raked quick fingers through hair cropped close as a fighting man's, then straightened in time to seem composed as Lord Tashan poked his white head inside.

'Your visitors have passed the last check-point.' The rotten old fox was smiling. As aged and worn as she through long years of shared hardship, he would guess she was flustered; and in hindsight, the blighted black cloth was a mistake that would accent any pallor born of nervousness.

Tartly, Maenalle attacked first. 'I could go and maybe lend a semblance of decorum if you'd make way and let me pass.'

Before Tashan could move, she brushed by, still shrugging to settle the tunic over her shoulders. Canny enough not to query her forceful choice of wardrobe, the old lord hurried on his limp to flank her, while dogs barked and dust flew, and sun-browned children in scuffed deerhides ran in a game of hunters and wolves through the stream-threaded shade of the defile. Built under cover on either side, the rows of ramshackle cabins sagged with the weight of storms and weather. If unglazed windows and walls laddered green under vines seemed uncivilized, Maenalle held no bitterness. Here, surrounded by inhospitable terrain; abutment of knife-edged rock and slide-scarred crags where loose shale and boulders could give way and break legs, the persecuted descendants of Tysan's deposed liegemen kept a grim measure of safety. Even the most fanatical town enemies were deterred from ranging too zealously for fugitives. Poor as her people were, at least the mountains allowed them the security to raise their children under timber roofs and to keep horses in limited herds.

The old blood clans elsewhere had far less in the centuries since the merchant guilds had overthrown kingdom rule, and headhunters rode to claim bounties.

None of Arithon's envoy travelled mounted, which explained the scout's misleading first report. Maenalle reached the palings that served as the outpost's main gate just as the arrival from Rathain filed through. Except for the eastern inflection as one commented, 'Ath, what do you look? This place could pass for a village,' the party might have blended with one of her patrols, Jieret's band were weather-worn, observant to the point of edged wariness, and dressed in leathers lacking any dyes or bright ornaments. Their weapons had seen hard use and every last man carried scars.

The rangy, tangle-haired red-head who stepped out to present his courtesies was no exception. Near to her grandson's age he might be, yet when he arose from his bow and towered over her, Maenalle revised her assessment. The eyes that met hers were chilly and wide, the mouth amid a gingery bristle of beard, fixed and straight. This was no green youth but a man of seventeen years who had seen his sisters and parents die in the service of his liege. Grief and premature responsibilities left their mark: a boy of twelve had grown up with the burden of safeguarding the north against the wave of vengeance-bent aggression that had dogged his people ever since the year the Mistwraith's malice had overset Rathain's peace.

In Tysan, where the feud between townborn and clan burned hotly enough without impetus from geas-cursed princes, Lady Maenalle shrank to imagine what extremity might bring the man to leave his native glens, to abandon his people and risk an overland journey through hostile territory to seek her.

'My Lord Earl,' she murmured. 'Forgive the lacklustre welcome, but surely you bring us bad news?' She accepted his kiss on her cheek and stepped back, unwilling to test her dignity too long against the younger man's frightening sense of presence.

Jieret bent upon Tysan's lady steward the unsettling intuition inherited from his late mother. 'We've surprised you.' The blood on her boots did not escape him, nor the reserve behind her *caithdein's* black. 'Let me ease your mind. We didn't call you back from the joys of the summer hunt to beg armed support for the sake of my liege lord, Arithon.'

'Not hers to give, if you had,' grumbled Tashan.

The comment fell through a misfortunate lull in the racket made by curious children. Stunned into movement like a bothered bear, a grizzled, fifty-ish war captain with inimical black eyes elbowed past his young chieftain's shoulder.

'Don't flatter yourselves for restraint.' Caolle loosed a clipped laugh. 'His Grace of Rathain is quite vicious enough on points of pride without anybody's outside help. He'd spurn even gold that fell at his feet, did it come to him struck with his name on it.'

Unsettled to learn the prince himself had not backed this surprise delegation, Maenalle forestalled the airing of issues more wisely discussed in private. 'Your war captain sounds like a traveller sorely in need of a beer.'

'Well, beer won't help,' Caolle grouched. 'Just a fair chance at gutting that blond-haired *prandey* who lounges in silk, and sends every trained sword in Etarra and beyond thrashing the countryside to harrow us.'

The trail scouts who guided the visitors stiffened, and a youngster close enough to overhear shouted, 'Hey! That man called our lord prince the Shandian word for a gelded pleasure bo-'

Maenalle spun swiftly and grabbed the child by the shoulder. 'Don't say such filth. You'

mother would thrash you. And you shouldn't be concerned with your elders' speech when my knowledge you aren't on my council.'

The miscreant gasped an apology, darted an enraged glance at Caolle, then sidled away. His lady chieftain released him. To the red-bearded *caithdein* and his grinning, insolent warchief captain, the steward of the Kingdom of Tysan finished in flat exasperation, 'By Ath, this visit of yours had better justify the aggravation.'

To which Earl Jieret s'Valerient said nothing. That the two gifted men who had restored Athera's sunlight were entrapped in an enmity which bent their bright and deadly talents against each other was a havoc too heartsore for reason.

Neither was he inclined to dwell on ceremony. Minutes later, seated by an untouched glass of wine across the planks of the outpost's scarred council table, he pulled a letter from the breast of his tunic. The dispatch was speckled with bloodstains. Since affairs between clans were never committed to writing, Maenalle's eyes flicked at once to discern which town seal impressed the broken wax.

Deshir's youthful earl saw her interest. 'The seal was royal, and Tysan's.' A reluctant pause, then his quick movement as he offered the missive across the trestle. 'This was captured from a guild courier riding the Mathorn Road under heavy escort. A state copy, you'll see, bound for official record with the trade guilds at Erdane. Clan lives were lost to intercept it. We must presume the original reached its destination.'

Maenalle accepted the folded parchment, its ribbons and gilded capitols done in the ornate style of Etarran scribes. She verified her kingdom's star blazon in its couch of indigo wax. Her glance at the flamboyant heading raised a flash-fire rush of antagonism. 'But our prince was disbarred from royal privilege! Why should he presume to write under Tysan's crown seal importuning the Mayor Elect of Korias?'

'Read,' growled Caolle.

White in dismay, Maenalle scanned down the lines, growing tenser and angrier, until even Lord Tashan's drywitted tolerance snapped. 'What's in that?'

'A petition.' Jieret all but spat on the beaten earth floor. 'From a prince denied right of sovereignty demanding title and grant to lands and city. By claim of birth, Lysaer s'Ilessid seeks leave to restore Tysan's capitol at Avenor.'

'He'll never get it,' Tashan said, halfway to his feet in indignation. 'Never mind that the merchant guilds won't stand a royal presence, the palace is in ruins, now. Not one stone stands upright on a foundation since the rebellion wrecked the old order. Past fears will prevail. Not a townborn mason would set foot there, haunted as they believe the site to be. And no clan in this kingdom can endorse a s'Ilessid claim without lawful sanction from the Fellowship.'

'But that's half the point,' Jieret said, too emphatically calm for a man under twenty years of age. 'The trade guilds in West End have nothing to lose. If the old land routes are rejoined with the Camris roads, they'll gain profits. The Mayor Elect in Korias will draw up the documents just for the chance to slight royalty. He's isolated enough not to know your deposed prince has the finesse to create the impossible. Daelion as my witness, in just five years Lysaer's reconciled Etarra's stew of rival factions. He's got guild ministers and town

councilmen kissing like brothers, and every independent city garrison in the Kingdom of Rathain conniving to exterminate my clansmen. If Lysaer can whip up armies to challenge shadow master and a sorcerer, do you think he can't get walls and barbicans built around the shades of a few thousand ghosts?'

'Royal sanction or not, your prince won't lack funds for his enterprise,' broke in Caolle. 'The towns are bothered to panic. To curry favour with the man whose gift of light offers protection against wild fears of Arithon's shadows, every trade guild owing notes to Etarran has offered their gold to fund armies. What townsman would pause to sort the difference between Arithon's feal liegemen and clanborn everywhere else?' Caolle slammed open her hands on the table, causing the thick planks to jump. 'Fiends! They're not so damned stupid as citybred fools though they be. If his Grace of Rathain turned up in any clan haven asking for a guest right, what chieftain would refuse him hospitality?'

'Havish's, under High King Eldir, would be wise to.' Maenalle shut her eyes, her fist with the letter bunched hard at her temple, and her free hand nerveless on the tabletop.

Unless and until the Fellowship sorcerers unriddled a way to break the blood feud engendered by Desh-thiere's revenge, the perils were too dire to deny.

These men at her table had seen the forefront of the war unleashed between the cursed princes. Even heard at second hand, the ruthless scale of the conflict was enough to bring cold sweats. When Prince Lysaer had raised the Etarran garrison to cut down Rathain's royal heir, one battle had seen two thirds of Deshir's clansmen fight to the death, despite the unstinting protections of sorcery and shadows lent by the liege lord they defended. Losses to the attackers had been more devastating. Fears of further retaliation by magecraft had drawn Lysaer to stay on in Rathain to unite its merchant guilds and quarrelsome, independent city governments. Against the rifts of old politics, he had seen stunning success. Every summer headhunters rode out in greater force to hunt down and slaughter clan fugitives in the search for the Master of Shadow.

For centuries, townsmen had killed clansmen on sight; the stakes now were never more dangerous. The beguiling inspiration of the Prince of the West lent city mayors powerful impetus to pool resources and systematically exterminate enemies already driven deep into hiding.

Having met Lysaer s'Ilessid only briefly, Maenalle still sighed in regret for a gifted statesman's skills twisted awry by Desh-thiere's curse. Through the course of just one past visit, her most reticent scouts had warmed to their prince enough to sorrow rather than rage over his treacherous alliance with town enemies. As for Arithon of Rathain, he was mage-trained: secretive, powerfully clever, and too fiendishly innovative to crumple before whatever odds Lysaer would raise against him.

'Where is your liege?' Maenalle asked. 'Does Arithon know his adversary now looks to claim ancestral lands in Tysan?'

Because her eyes were averted, only Tashan saw the exasperated look that flashed between the earl and his war captain. To Jieret's staunch credit, he found courage to answer her directly. 'We came to give warning. Of Arithon's intent, we've no clue. When he left us, he made his will plain. He would not have his presence become a target to encourage the ge-

that drives him and Lysaer to war.'

Still bluntly irked over a clash of wills fully five years gone, Caolle knotted ham fists on the trestle top. 'We haven't seen or heard from our liege since the rite sung over our w dead. Ath knows where he is. His Grace himself won't deign to send word.'

Which explained the hardness behind Jieret's focused maturity, Maenalle concluded in silent pain. To him alone had fallen the task of guarding his people from Etarra's seasonal purge by headhunters. The woman in her ached for her grandson, who might come to taste the same griefs.

If Lysaer won title to Avenor, the rift engendered by Desh-thiere's ills, that had sundered Rathain and sparked old hates to furious bloodshed, must inevitably sweep into Tysan.

'Our clans will prepare for the worst,' Maenalle concluded in bitterness. She arose, let the wrung parchment fall on the tabletop, then offered the beleaguered young earl the courtes due to an equal, for whether he had gained the privilege of swearing fealty to a lawful sanctioned prince, like her, he was *caithdein* to a realm without a king. His liege lord did not back him; by himself, Jieret had shouldered the risk, had left Rathain's shores with the fourteen companions who were his last surviving peers to bring word of Lysaer's false intent.

For all her sixty years, Maenalle felt tired and disheartened; beaten down with sorrow enough to contemplate what this red-bearded stripling would not, even for grief since the slaughter of his family: break down and give way to hatred, abandon himself to vindictive killing.

'You don't resent your prince for going,' she found herself saying in unabashed awe. Tasha turned around to stare at her, while Caolle looked on, nonplussed.

Their reactions passed unheeded as Jieret gave her the first true smile she had seen. 'I can't admire Arithon, much as my father did, though my line's gift of Sight warned us both that my family would die in royal service.'

'I met your liege once,' Maenalle admitted. 'Though I never saw him work shadows or magecraft, Ath grant me grace, I wish never to cross wits with him again.'

Rueful in grim understanding, Jieret said, 'Never mind Ath. If my liege has his way, you probably won't. I believe he finds contentment in obscurity.'

Neither cynical Caolle nor Tysan's lady steward wasted breath to belabour the obvious that Prince Lysaer's public presence and insidious charisma must eventually come to prevail. Arithon of Rathain would awaken one day, else be battered from his complaisance.

Grant

Talith, sister to Etarra's Lord Commander of the Guard, could recall when early autumn had filled the city with the smell of ripe apples. Hauled in on the farm-wains that toiled up the winding roads through the passes, the fruit had been unloaded in piles on burlap in the raucous expanse of the markets. In imitation of the pranks of older gallants, bored, rich young boys once delighted in upsetting the stacks to the detriment of passing traffic. Birds

squabbled over the cidery crush milled under by the cartwheels, and winds whisked the burden of scraping, flying leaves, sharpened by frost off the peaks.

But if the sunlight restored since the Mistwraith's captivity had increased the orchard bounty, Etarra held widespread change.

Spurred to fears of attack by shadows and sorcery, and through promise to aid armed resource with the powers over light that alone could protect and counterward, the brilliant statesmanship of one man had annealed strained politics into alliance. Due to Lysaer s'Ilessid's dedication, the disparate city governments inside Rathain's borders now stood united in common cause. The miracle of their accord brought unprecedented co-operation. Against the barbarian clans who had harboured the fugitive Master of Shadow, every garrison in the north levied troops to support Etarra's campaign.

Apples were now stacked in barrels to discourage pilfering, and the season's turn jammed streets built wide enough to accommodate the heaviest caravans with shipments of provisions and arms for the bursars. Arranged like a hub in the Mathom Pass, the wealthiest trade center on the continent spent its treasury to house and maintain a war camp through the winter. The hay-fields nearest to the walls sprouted a muddy, trampled maze of officer's shacks, supply tents and barracks, each block marked off like street signs by standards with sun-faded banners. Grown yearly more familiar, the taint of coal from the armourers'-fires wrapped the rooftops in haze that deepened with dusk to blue mist.

Lady Talith disdained to share in the commotion of the returning army. She disliked loud-voiced men and salons packed with women nervously desperate for news. That the royal-born-sorcerer Etarra's new field host was intended to annihilate had so far refused to reappear did nothing to blunt the unease in the streets: his spells and his shadows had bought seven thousand deaths five years past in Deshir. The grief and the terror remained, never to be forgotten. The garrison that endured sustained its festered rage by bloodying what remained of Arithon's allies, clan barbarians systematically pursued and ferreted out of the wilds. For deeply personal reasons, Talith hated the boastful stories of ambush and campaign the reminiscences of past seasons. And so she disdained the invitations and the crush, and stood with her chin pillowed on furred cuffs to gaze over the square brick embrasure that faced the mountains.

When the troops first marched in, she had heard what mattered from Diegan: the crack divisions deployed into Halwythwood's deep glens had returned with markedly poor success. No barbarian camps at all had been found to be put to the sword.

Again, the brigands under Caolle and Jieret Red-beard had made sport of the headhunter's efforts. Except for one isolated incident, their bands of clan scouts had escaped, despite repeated complaints of raiding and couriers brazenly killed or waylaid as near as the Mathom road.

Lysaer s'Ilessid had warned that the barbarians would organize; that Arithon's ongoing disappearance presaged more devious plans. Having met the Master of Shadow just once, Talith shared his unrest.

A light voice cut across her thoughts. 'I thought I should find you here.'

The postern door had opened silently and the step that approached was dancer-light. Tali

did not turn, though the hair pinned in coils by her gold-wired pearls trapped heat at the base of her neck. Haughtily still in her wrappings of tawny velvet, lined by the flicker of the lamplighter's torch as he shuffled on his eventide route down the wall, she loosed an invisible sigh.

The man most sought after and admired in all the rich halls of Etarra, Lysaer s'Ilessi called Prince of the West and saviour of the city, perched with poised grace at her elbow. A pause developed as he examined her; a man would be dead, not to suck a rushed breath from her beauty.

Torchlight caught his sapphires like splintered ice as he added, 'At long last, I've had word'

Talith raked her teeth over her lower lip to redden and brighten her pout. 'You've located your bane? The Master of Shadow has been found?'

His stark and stubborn silence informed her that he had not.

From behind, glass chinked as the arthritic old servant fumbled to unlatch the poster lamp's cover. Lysaer pushed off the crenellation, gave a casual flick of his hand. A spark jumped from his finger across empty air and snapped the wick into flame behind the smudged panes.

The lampsman gave a violent start and spun around. Made aware of just who stood with the lady, he gulped in pale awe and knelt. 'Your royal Grace.'

'Ath bless, you need not bow.' Lysaer gave the man a grin and a silent, conspiratorial gesture to hurry along on his rounds. Never one to flaunt his gifted powers, this night, the prince was jealous of his privacy.

'Ah,' sighed the lampsman, recovering. He returned a wink and hurried off, trailing the oil reek of torch smoke around the bend by the gatehouse. Inside the ward room, a guard lost his dice throw and cursed, his epithets obscured as a wagon rumbled down the thoroughfare below.

Persistent despite interruptions, Talith said, 'What word could move you but the wish of your heart, to find out where Arithon's hiding? Ath knows, you've searched every cranny in Rathain.'

The prince who had helped wrest the sun clear of mist was never an easy man to nettle. 'I'd unmasked that sorcerer's whereabouts, beloved, your brother's troops would be marching in winter ice or not.' Unlike the fashion of the dandies, Lysaer wore no scent. He required none. The closeness of him seemed to burn Talith through to the skin. She needed to shed the clinging weight of her mantle, but dared not.

He touched her arm and gently turned her. Even after five years, the beauty of him stole her breath. The flare of new lantern light fired his gold hair, gilded perfect cheekbones and sculpted chin and a bearing instinctively royal. As earnestly as the city gallants strove to emulate such carriage, inherent majesty eluded them. Then, forthright as no man born in Etarra would ever be, the prince cupped her face and kissed her.

Passion flurried and tangled Talith's thinking.

He was excited by something. His hands trembled and his eyes drank in the sight of her with scarcely veiled anticipation.

Piqued enough by his secrecy to use looks that could bring men to their knees, Talith drew back and struck him lightly on the jewelled sleeve of his doublet. 'What have you learned?'

Lysaer laughed, a flash of perfect teeth. 'The best news. Never mind the Master and his shadows.' Eagerness let him speak of his nemesis without his usual brooding frown. 'The Mayor of Korias has finally set seal to my claim. Avenor and its lands are to be mine.' He caught her waist and spun her, while around them, the flutter of night insects battered the glass in their fatal, blind swoop to the light. 'We can officially formalize our engagement. That's if you can find heart to marry a prince who has title, but no subjects, and fields gone to briar and wilderness.'

Talith looked into deep sapphire eyes and shivered. 'Everywhere you go you have subjects,' she said. 'Not least that decrepit old lampblack. He'll brag to his grandchildren until he dies for your tricks. Never say it was I who insisted on meaningless propriety.'

He reached, brushed back the loose curl at her temple, then began with abandon to pluck out jewelled pins. Neither of them noticed the dicers' revealing silence in the gate house as a cataract of wheat-gold hair unreeled over his ringed knuckles. Lysaer touched her brow with his lips. 'I could accept no estate as a gift from Lord Diegan.' His mouth trailed down her cheek, caressing. 'Not when I'm the one laying claim to his sole, magnificent sister.' He reached the left corner of her mouth. As her lips parted to receive him, he held back for one last rejoinder. 'I shall plunder this city, nonetheless. The jewel of Avenor's restoration shall be your hand. My word as prince, your beauty and your children will become the crown's treasures of Tysan, and the ones most munificently cherished.'

At long last he tasted her fully.

Down the battlement, the wide-eyed watch clapped and raised rough cheers. Lysaer inclined his head their way in courtly salute, then turned his shoulder and rearranged tawny velvet to shield the face of his beloved from their charring.

Talith melted into his embrace, every nerve in her stretched to match the bent of his desire. She could wish her heart was not cruelly held captive; she could ache with the hard female knowledge this marriage to come must eventually consume and destroy her. Like the moths, she could not steer away and save herself from the blinding.

The man in her arms was too much for her. Foremost a prince, he was the selfless instrument of others dependent on his protection. His daunting gifts already bound him to commitments far stronger than love. The hands that tenderly cradled her, that had casually sparked flame to a recalcitrant lamp, could as easily raise power with the virulence of summer lightning. Against the deceit of Arithon s'Ffalenn, and the scars of a city that had survived a war fuelled with the selfsame shadows that had beaten back the Mistwraith, the man's defence had been dedicated.

Exalted and imprisoned by shameless happiness, Lady Talith blinked back rising tears. What was Avenor to become, if rebuilt, but a broader base of support for wider campaigns and more armies? She understood with a rage that drove her to hate the more fiercely. Lysaer s'Ilessid would never have peace. Nor would he become fully hers until the day the Master of Shadow was found and run down, to be finally, safely put to death.

Evasions

Taxed to aching exhaustion by another joint effort at scrying, the First Enchantress to the Koriani Prime retorts in ragged exasperation: 'We've swept the lanes through five kingdoms, exhausted every clan haven in Rathain, and set tag spells and trigger traps along trails and roads and taverns for half a decade! If the Master of Shadow had died, or fallen off the face of Athera, we should have recovered *some* trace of him...'

Far to the east, in a city bounded by the waters of Eltair Bay, a sweating, obsequious millwright stammers frightened excuses to an official in black and gold robes emblazoned with the lion of mayoral authority, 'But of course, my word of honour, the errors in design shall be corrected. The crown moulding for his lordship's lady wife shall be redone and delivered to the city inside the next fortnight...'

As autumn days shorten toward solstice and the stunted firs of high altitude moan to the batter of cold winds, Dakar the Mad Prophet begs a ride to the next town; and the charge laid on him the past spring, to find and safeguard the most hunted man on the continent, remains cheerfully ignored for the pleasures of beer and loose women...

II. VAGRANT

Dakar the Mad Prophet opened his eyes to a view of the steamed-over glass in some backwater tavern's dingy casement. Rain spiked with ice chapped against rondels filmed over with smoke soot. The boards under his cheek were rudely cut, sticky with rancid layers of grease and spilled ale. His mouth tasted as if it had hosted a convocation of snails. Clued by the ache in his back that he had probably slept where he sat, and familiar enough with his excesses to know when the wrong move could hurt, he groaned.

No female rushed to soothe him; the slight noise instead spurred an explosive pain in his head. He stirred, eyes squeezed shut, and pressed chilled hands to his temples. His ankles were also ice cold, result of having parked nightlong in a draught with his feet still encased in wet socks. Both boots appeared to be missing.

The Mad Prophet moaned in self pity, but softly. With caution he managed to straighten up. His eyes refused to focus, a common problem; he had been born nearsighted. The point became moot, that Asandir's tutelage had schooled him to correct the deficiency, as well as the torment of bad hangovers. To reverse any bodily failing, he needed to be sober and clear minded, neither one a state to be desired. Dakar fumbled through a succession of capacious pockets in quest of a coin to buy beer.

Across the tavern's cramped common room, somebody screamed. Drilled through the ears by the sound, Dakar shot bolt upright and banged his knees against the trestle. He aimed a bleary glare at a mule drover who howled still, apparently over a winning throw at darts. The tanner with the frizzled moustache stood up as his opponent doled out the stake, while a half-toothless roisterer on the sidelines shouted, 'Where's your courage man? Try another game!'

Dakar winced and groped tenderly through another pocket. As the barmaid whisked past bearing ale to the victor, he dredged up a hopeful smile.

Blonde and fast-tongued and inaccessible, she noticed his search through his clothing. 'Your pockets are empty as your purse. And no, you weren't robbed while you slept.'

The Mad Prophet absorbed this, lamenting that she moved too briskly for him to land an effective pinch. He stared owlishly as the flagon was carried on to the victor. Soon enough the renewed thwacks of a fresh game's thrown darts pierced through the complaints of the loser.

About then it dawned with awful force that his pockets contained only lint. He found himself destitute on the edge of winter in a sheep farming village in the Skyshiels. Dakar's yell rivalled the mule drover's, and the barmaid, incensed, hurried over and clanged her tray.

of emptied crockery by his elbow.

While Dakar cringed back from the din, she ran on, 'I *said*, nobody robbed you. Wh coppers you had barely paid for last night's ale.' To Dakar's softly bleared gaze, annoyance stole nothing from her charm. 'I see you don't remember? That's odd. You put away fifteen rounds.'

Probably truth, Dakar reflected muddily, the state of his bladder was killing him. He braced chubby hands on the trestle, prepared to arise and embark for the privy.

Warmed now to her tirade, the barmaid unkindly refused him passage. 'The only reason you weren't thrown out is because the landlord took pity for the weather.'

Since Dakar had yet to raise concern over what the day looked like outdoors, he surveyed the room to fix his bearings. The tavern was of typical backlands construction: two storeys with the ceiling beams that supported the second floor set low enough to bother a tall man in posture. The single lantern hissed and sputtered, fuelled by a reeking tallow dip that smoked far worse than the hearth. In a dimness tinged luridly orange, darts flurried between support posts into a shaggy straw target. The mule drover cursed a wide throw, which prompted a laugh from the tanner. A gnarled old cooper in the corner muttered slurred lines of doggerel and sniggers erupted like the feeding squeals of a hog's farrow. Dakar, brimming and uncomfortable, rolled long-suffering eyes. When the bar wench failed to move, he succumbed to temptation and shoved a hand down her bulging blouse.

No matter how unsteady he was on his feet, his fingers knew their way about a woman.

The wench hissed in affront. Her shove plonked the Mad Prophet backward on the unpadded timber of the bench. The air left his lungs in a whistle. Tediously, he started the effort of dragging himself upright all over again.

'Slip on the ice,' snapped the serving maid. She snatched up her tray to an indignant rattling of cheap crockery. 'The door will be barred when you come back, and I hope your bollocks freeze solid.'

Suffering too much for rejoinder, Dakar pried his gut from behind the trestle and carved a staggering course toward the doorway. As he bypassed the party at the fireside, a dart flew to another barrage of shouts. The mule drover had hit another bull's-eye.

'Damn me to Sithaer,' cried the tanner in beet-faced irritation. 'You cheat like the Shadow Master himself!'

Dakar tacked sharply and caught himself a bump against the doorpost. 'Hardly,' he volunteered to whoever was wise enough to listen. 'Yon one's no man for harmless games. His sort of tricks infuriate and kill and make enemies.'

But the Mad Prophet's slurred advice was pre-empted by warning from another bystander. 'Don't speak that name here! Would you draw him, and the winds of ill luck? Sorcerers hear their names spoken. There's a burned patch, I've heard, in Deshir where the soldier's bones lie that will never again grow green trees.'

Dakar half-turned to denounce this, but lost his chance as the latch let go under his hand. The doorpanel he leaned on suddenly swung wide and spilled him outside in a stumble. He yowled his injured shock as grey slush soaked both feet to the ankles; no boots, he

remembered belatedly. The struggle to go back in and search for them entailed too much effort, his hose being already sodden.

The inn yard wore ice in sheets unsliced by the ruts of any cartwheels. Unless there were east-running storms, travellers on the Eltair road were unlikely to choose the byway through the foothills. Beleaguered by gusts that cut straight off the summits of the Skyshields to rattle the signboard of the cooper's shack, stung by an unkindly fall of sleet, Dakar yawed and slipped on his errand. He collided with the firewood hovel, a hitching rack and a water trough, and cursed in dark conclusion that mountain villages were an uncivilized place to suffer the virulent effects of brewed hops.

Returned an interval just short of frostbite, with his points tangled and his hair screwed into ringlets by the damp, he blundered back to the tavern door. He had sheltered in the privy until the cold came near to killing him, and was ready primed with pleas in case the barman was still piqued. But the panel was not locked against him. Intensely relieved, Dakar hauled his mushy socks into the taproom as furtively as his shivering would allow.

Nobody noticed him.

The door had stayed unbarred in the bustle created by a new arrival, a slender, aged gentleman even now being solicitously ushered to the fireside. The landlord had personally stirred from his parlour for this service, and even the sour-tempered bar wench had brightened in her haste to cheer the gloom with rushlights.

Probably some rich man stranded in the passes by a wrong turn in the storm, Dakar supposed; until he noticed the dart players standing stilled in mute awe with their coins abandoned on the table.

'Fiends plague me, I never thought to live as witness,' the mule drover said in a powerful whisper. 'The Masterbard himself, come to visit our village?'

Dakar blinked in astonishment. Halliron, *here?*

Beyond the smoke-grimed support beams, the newcomer tossed back his sleet-crusting hood. Shoulder-length hanks of white hair tumbled free, caught with sparkles of unmelted ice. Then, striking and clear as a signature, a mellowed voice addressed the landlord. 'What storm. The passes are awful. We have silver if you've got quarters for extra lodgers.'

'Oh, no!' protested the innkeeper. 'That is, I have rooms. All tidy. Cleanest linen on the coast side of High-scarp. But your coin stays in your purse. Every penny. Your presence will draw customers just for the news, even if you don't care to sing.'

'Your commons won't go tuneless, for your kindness,' Halliron promised. Erect despite more than eight decades of age, he had a prominent, aristocratic nose, and spaced front teeth that flashed in a smile. 'We'll need two beds. My apprentice will be in as soon as he's stable with the pony.'

Crouched down to build up the fire, the landlord straightened up, horrified. 'My boy, didn't he meet you in the yard? Why, that laggard, no-good -'

The door latch tripped amid the tirade. Wind-driven sleet slashed in on the draught that breathed chill through the fug from the fire as a figure muffled in wet woollens entered, moving fast. Dakar's parked bulk was side-stepped and a new voice cut in, declaiming, 'You'

anger's misplaced. Your groom is hard at work. The harness was wet and needed oiling, and Halliron's pony hates boys. My master would have told you, I usually tend him myself.'

Impatient with his headache and his relapsed eyesight, Dakar squinted at the latest arrival. Layered as he was in tatty mufflers and a cape-shouldered, nondescript mantle, there seemed more wool to him than man. A path cleared before him to the hearthside. Caked ice cracked from his clothing as he undid fastenings to disgorge a long, tapered bundle laced in oilskin. This he deposited carefully out of reach of the fire's leaping heat. A pair of wet gloves flew off after, to land smartly on top of the settle.

Then movement at the corner of his vision caused the stranger swiftly to spin. 'No,' he said firmly. 'Let me.'

And Halliron, who had reached to unfasten his cloak brooch, found his wrists gently caught and restrained.

'You must spare those fingers,' chided the Master-bard's apprentice. All unwittingly, he had managed to draw every eye in the room.

Too congenial to be embarrassed by public attention, the aged bard gave a hampered shrug. While younger hands worked to shed his weight of sodden mantles, the innkeeper's spaniel-eyed sympathy raised his humour. 'Never get old. It's a ridiculously uncomfortable procedure. Ath Creator should be made to find a cure for.'

Remiss for his neglected hospitality, the innkeeper barked at his barmaid. 'Mulled wine, girl, and hot soup. And if the wife is still dallying about the kitchen, tell her to cut the fresh bread.'

While the wench hustled off, a thoughtful Dakar propped his swaying balance against the nearest trestle. As unabashed as the dart players, he stared while the bard's apprentice left to attend his master and turned to peel off his own heavy cloak. The man revealed underneath proved to be an indeterminate age in his twenties, compactly built to the point of slenderness. Nondescript ash brown hair fell lankly over thin cheekbones, and his eyes were muddy grey hazel.

He was nobody Dakar knew.

While the visitors settled themselves, the landlord retired behind the bar to industriously buff water spots off the few tankards he owned that had glazing. Over the flow of resumed conversation as the dart players renewed their dropped game, the high-pitched exclamation of the tavern mistress rang from the depths of a pantry closet, followed by a banging of pots and hurried footsteps. A drudge appeared with bristle brush and bucket to scour the grime from the boards, while Dakar took himself off to an unobtrusive window nook, brightened by his upturn in prospects. Penniless still, sober enough to be plagued by the granddame of a headache, he barely winced as other steps thumped the boards over his head: some servant dispatched no doubt to ensure the linens lived up to the innkeeper's boasts. The back door banged. Outside, through the whirl of grey sleet, one of the innkeeper's mop-headed children dashed to spread word that the Masterbard of Athera had taken up residence for the night.

Soon enough, the stable boy came in with the bard's bundles of baggage. The apprentice accepted the burden and was shown upstairs to their lodgings, while the Masterbard sat b

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