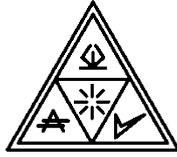


THE ASSASSIN'S EDGE
The Fifth Tale of Einarinn
Juliet E McKenna



Chapter One

*Notice from the Prefecture
of the University of Col
To all Resident Mentors and Scholars*

By long tradition festivals at the turn of every season are a time for this university to welcome visitors from other seats of learning. We are accustomed to do so with every courtesy and luxury afforded by this city's extensive trade, our contribution to the commerce that is Col's lifeblood. Students and scholars alike mingle with visitors and townsfolk, broadening their experience of life. Accordingly, the Prefects of this university will not tolerate any repetition of the incidents disgracing this most recent spring Equinox.

In choosing a life of study, we all suffer accusations of idleness, and rebuke for perceived failure to produce anything of tangible worth to the unscholarly mind. We rise above such taunts, secure in the knowledge that learning outlasts any achievements of merchants and architects, artisans and their guilds. All of which tolerance is rendered worthless when students, scholars and even several mentors are clapped in irons by the Watch for brawling with visitors from Vanam's university in taverns frequented by common dockers.

Worse, word now circulates that these arguments were not over money, some business disagreement or a lady's favours, but over points of scholarship. This university has become an object of ridicule among the populace. The Prefecture considers this an offence graver than all of the damage done around the city. Broken windows, doors and wine bottles may be redeemed with gold. A reputation once tarnished may never recover its lustre.

To obviate any recurrence of such offences, the Prefecture offers the following for the immediate consideration of mentors and scholars and the judicious guidance of students.

Denying Temar D'Alsennin is who he claims to be is as irrational as refusing to accept the accounts of that restoration of him and his people through the offices of Archmage Planir of Hadrimal. It is equally nonsensical to claim this is all falsehood in service of some all encompassing yet curiously ill-defined conspiracy involving the Archmage, the Mentors of Vanam and even Emperor Tadriol himself. Such foolishness does this university's standing immeasurable harm.

However' and notwithstanding the overweening arrogance of certain scholars of Vanam, the return of Temar D'Alsennin to Tormalin will not answer one hundredth of the questions as to why the Old Empire collapsed. He cannot tell us why the dethronement of Nemith the Reckless and Last precipitated the Chaos rather than orderly transition to a new Emperor and dynasty. D'Alsennin's attempt to found his colony has no bearing on any of these events. It was a minor undertaking compared to other ventures the Old Empire was then engaged upon, most notably the ultimately fruitless conquest of Gidesta. That this colony was of little or no consequence to the Convocation of Princes is plain. Rather than divert resources to helping D'Alsennin, the Annals record every House turning its efforts to quelling secessionist revolts in Caladhria and opportunist uprisings in Ensaimin.

D'Alsennin can offer only a limited account from a very partial perspective as a young and untried esquire of a minor House long distanced from the councils of the powerful. He had already crossed the ocean to Kel Ar'Ayen before the final, crucial years of Nemith's reign and had long been rendered insensible by enchantment before the most violent period of warfare between the Houses of Aleonne and Modrical. While his reminiscences may offer some interesting sidelights on those momentous events, they are insignificant in the wider context of the established historical record.

Granted, it seems likely that the as yet only partially explained deterioration in the usages of aetheric magic contributed to the collapse of the Empire. Judging the impact of such a blow, set alongside the attested assaults of famine, civil strife and the recurrent devastation of the Crusted Pox will certainly be a fruitful area for study. Similarly, a full assessment of the role of this aetheric magic in the governance of the Old Empire must now be made. We of Col should not be laggard in undertaking such enquiries. We need not concern ourselves with boasts from Vanam that their mentors' links with Planir's expeditions to Kel Ar'Ayen give their scholars unassailable superiority in such studies.

Col is the main port through which travellers to and from Hadrumal pass. We should set aside our habitual reserve in dealing with wizardry and invite mages to refresh themselves in our halls and join in our debates. We may usefully encourage our alchemists to correspond with those wizards studying the properties of the natural elements. This university was founded by those scholars who salvaged all they could from the burning of this city's ancient temple library during the Chaos. It is now evident that such temples were centres of aetheric learning in the Old Empire. Resident scholars and mentors must seek out such valuable lore hidden in our own archives. We can claim more peripatetic scholars than Vanam and many now tutor the sons and daughters of Tormalin Houses as well as the scions of Lescari dukes and Caladhria's barons. All such archives may yield invaluable material for further study and this prefecture is writing to enlist the aid of all entitled to wear this university's silver ring.

Rather than wasting time and effort in vain attempts to prove this university's supremacy over Vanam through fisticuffs, it is the duty of every mentor, scholar and student to establish our pre-eminence through the ineluctable authority of our scholarship.



*Vithrancel, Kellarin
15th of Aft-Spring,
in the Fourth Year of Tadriol the Provident*

In that instant of waking, I had no idea where I was. A crash of something breaking had stirred me and the muttered curses that followed took my sleep-mazed mind back to the house of my childhood but as I opened my eyes, nothing seemed familiar. Insistent daylight was entering unopposed through a door in an entirely unexpected wall. Come to that, when had I last slept with a heedlessly open bedroom door?

Wakefulness burned through the mist of sleep. I wasn't back in Ensaimin, for all that someone outside was muttering in the accents of my childhood. This was half a world away, clear across an ocean most folk would swear was impassable. This was Vithrancel, newly named first settlement of Kellarin, a colony still finding its feet after a year of digging in its heels and setting its shoulder to hacking a livelihood out of the wilderness.

Well, whatever was going on outside, it could happen without me. I wasn't getting out of bed for anything short of a full-blown riot. Turning over, I pulled the linen sheet up around my shoulders, pushing my cheek into the welcoming down of the pillow, plump with my spoils from the festival slaughter of geese and hens. How many more days up to my elbows in chicken guts would it take before I had a feather bed, I wondered idly.

No, it was no good; I was awake. Sighing, I sat up and brushed the hair out of my eyes to survey the little room. I'd slept in better, in stone-built inns with drugget laid to mute the scuff of boots on polished floorboards, tapestries on walls to foil stray draughts and prices just as elaborate, never mind the extra copper spent to keep the potmen and chambermaids sweet. Then again, I'd slept in worse, down-at-heel taverns where you were lucky to share a bed with strangers and picking up whatever vermin they carried was all part of the price to pay. The most wretched inn was better than a freezing night beneath a market hall's arches, giving up my last copper to persuade a watchman to look the other way.

I went to open the shutters to the bright midmorning sun. No, I wasn't about to complain about a warm, clean room, floor newly strewn with the first herbs of spring. The breeze was cool on my bare skin and I looked for a clean shirt among clothes and trifles piled on my fine new clothes press. Ryshad had bought it for me with three days trading his skills with plumb line, mallet and chisel to a nearby carpenter. My beloved might have decided against his father's trade in the end but he'd not forgotten his lessons. I really should tidy up, I thought, as I sat on his old travel chest pulling on my breeches.

The bright leather of a newly bound book caught my eye among the clutter on my press. It was a collection of ancient songs that I'd found the year before, full of hints of ancient magic. In an optimistic ballad for children, there'd have been some charm within it to summon sprites to do the housework for me. I smiled, not for the first time at the notion. On the other hand, any number of darker lyrics warned of the folly of meddling with unseen powers, lest the unwise rouse the wrath of the Eldritch Kin. I'm too old to believe in blameless strangers turning into blue-grey denizens of the shadow realms and turning on those who dishonoured them but there were other reasons for me to shun some of the more tempting promises of Artifice. If I used aetheric tricks and charms to read an opponent's thoughts or see their throw of the runes ahead of time, I'd blunt skills that had seen me

through more perils than Ryshad knew of.

Chinking noises outside drew me to the window instead. A stout woman in practical brown skirts bent to retrieve shards of earthenware scattered on the track between our house's ramshackle vegetable garden and the neater preserve over the way. A spill of liquid darkened the earth at her feet.

'Dropped something, Zigrida?' I leant my elbows on the sill. She straightened up, looking around for who had hailed her as she brushed a hand clean on her dress. I waved.

'Livak, good morning.' A smile creased her weathered face agreeably. 'It's Deglain standing the loss.' She sniffed cautiously at the base of the pitcher she'd been stacking the other pieces in. 'It smells like the rotgut that Peyt and his cronies brew.'

I frowned. 'It's not like Deg to come home drunk, not at this time of the morning.'

'Swearing fouler than a cesspit and throwing away good crocks.' Zigrida's voice darkened with disapproval. 'But he's a mercenary when all's said and done.'

'Not like Peyt,' I objected. Granted Deglain had come to Kellarin paid to stick his sword into whoever might wish this colony venture ill, but a year and more on, he'd returned to skills learned in some forgotten youth and half the colonists simply knew him as a tinsmith.

Zigrida grunted as she tucked a wisp of grey hair beneath the linen kerchief tied around her head. 'I can't see any more pieces.'

'There aren't many passing hooves to pick them up,' I pointed out.

'That's not the point, my girl.' Zigrida looked up at me, shading warm brown eyes with an age-spotted and work-hardened hand that brushed the lace trimming her kerchief with a hint of frivolity. 'It's time you were out of bed, my lady sluggard. You can get a bucket of water to wash this away.' She scraped a stoutly booted foot across the damp ground before glancing towards the steadily retreating trees that fringed the settlement. 'I don't care to know what the scent of strong liquor might tempt out of that wildwood.'

I grinned. 'At once, mistress.' I'll take Zigrida's rebukes as long as a twinkle in her eye belies her scolding and besides, doing her a favour always wins me some goodwill.

Tidying up could wait. I dragged the sheets across the mattress brushing a few stray hairs to the floor, bright auburn from my head, curled black from Ryshad's. Our bed was a solid construction of tight-fitted wood finished with golden beeswax and strung with good hemp rope. Ryshad wasn't about to sleep on some lumpy palliasse or a box bed folded out of a settle. Lower servants slept on such things, not men chosen for preferment out of all those swearing service to the Sieur D'Olbriot, nigh on the richest and most influential of all Tormalin's princes.

Then I looked rather doubtfully at the sheets. The mattress was still fragrant with bedstraw gathered in the golden days of autumn but the linen wanted washing, if not today then soon. I had a nice wash house out behind the house but spending the day stoking the fire to boil the water in the copper and poking seething sheets with a stick was scant entertainment. Before I'd come here, laundry was always someone else's concern as I'd moved from inn to inn, earning my way gambling and with the occasional less reputable venture.

I pulled the top sheet free of the blanket and dumped it on the battered chest at the foot of the bed. Ryshad stowed his possessions inside it with neatness drilled into him from ten or more years of barracks life. He deserved a clothes press like mine, I decided. Ryshad's help had set Kerse up with a better workshop than any of the other woodsmen of the colony. They were all turning to joinery now they could spare time from shaping joists and beams. Now spring Equinox had opened the sailing seasons, Kerse needed to consider the markets for work this fine right across the countries that had once made up the Tormalin Empire. I knew quality when I saw it; in a girlhood seeming even more distant than the lands we'd left behind, I'd been a housemaid polishing up prized pieces not worked with a fifth the skill of

our new bed.

But Zigrida had asked me to fetch some water. I'd better do that before thinking about laundry. I abandoned the sheet and went down the cramped stair boxed into a corner of the kitchen that took up the back half of our little cruck framed house. Using the belt knife laid on a stool with the jerkin I'd discarded the night before, I carved a slice from the ham hanging by the chimneybreast, savouring the hint of juniper and sweet briar that had gone into the curing. Chewing, I went in search of a bucket in the tiny scullery that Ryshad had screened off from the kitchen. I ignored the flagon of small beer keeping cool in the stone sink my beloved had painstakingly crafted. If I was going to the well, I'd make do with water. Ale was never my first choice for breakfast, nor Ryshad's, but the winter had seen supplies of wine from Tormalin exhausted.

As I opened the kitchen door and crossed the rudimentary cobbles Ryshad had laid to get us dryshod to the gate, a girl came running up to Deglain's house, across the track. It was twin to our own, sunlight white on lime wash still fresh over the lath and plaster solidly walling the timber frame. It had been interesting watching them being built; Ryshad had explained exactly how the weight of one part leant on another that pulled something else, the tension keeping the whole house solid.

The buttercup yellow shawl over the girl's head gave me a moment's pause but then I recognised the lass. 'Catrice! Is everything all right?'

She ignored me, hammering on Deglain's door. Deg opened the door, only a crack at first. Seeing Catrice, he flung it wide and tried to fold the girl into his arms.

She resisted his embrace with a forceful shove. 'You stink!'

Deg's reply didn't have the piercing clarity of Catrice's outrage so I couldn't make out his words but his blinking eyes and unshaven disorder were eloquent enough.

'I'll not sleeping in the bed of any man who falls in it half dressed and full drunk,' she shrilled, hysteria sharpening her tone.

'Do you suppose her mother knows she's here?' Zigrida came to the fence on her side of the precisely delineated alley separating our two properties. With a whole continent to spread ourselves over, there would be none of the squabbles over boundaries that plague the higgledy-piggledy burgages of Ensaimin's close-packed towns.

'She'll be none to pleased when she finds out,' I commented. Catrice was the only and much cherished daughter of one of the southern Tormalin families come to make a new life in this untamed land the year before. They were still apt to take their consequence rather too seriously for my taste. Zigrida was from the north, close to the Lescari border and, as such, considerably more down to earth.

Whatever Deg had to say for himself was enough to set Catrice to noisy weeping. She didn't resist as he pulled her into an awkward hug, clumsily wiping at her tears with the edge of her shawl.

Zigrida watched the pair disappear inside. 'You reckon something's boiling up?'

'Could be something, could be nothing,' I shrugged. 'But we'd best be ready to stick in a spoon to quell any froth.' In general, colonists and the mercenaries hired to defend them rubbed along easily enough together but there had been a few awkwardnesses. The sons and daughters of sober yeomen occasionally found the free and easy attitudes of the soldiery rather too enticing for their parents' peace of mind.

'Are you going to send for the corps commander?' Zigrida asked.

'Perhaps.' Halice, currently in charge of the mercenaries, had been a friend of mine for years and I served as her unofficial deputy when I had nothing better to do. 'Did you see Ryshad this morning?' I'd got used to staying asleep when Ryshad rose with the dawn to pursue one of his myriad projects around Vithrancel.

'That Werdel came calling first thing. They'll be out at the clay fields.' Zigrida's tone

was warm with approval. She liked Ryshad.

I smiled too. I was more than content with a cruck-framed house, it's how four-fifths of Ensaimin's towns are built but Ryshad considered wooden buildings as nothing more than temporary. Before the previous autumn's Equinox had barred the ocean to ships, he'd recruited the son of a brick-maker known to his stone-mason brothers in Zyoutessela and had half the men of the colony digging clay on the promise of a share in the bricks and tiles. As soon as the scarce frosts of Kellarin's mild winter had passed, Ryshad reminded everyone they'd promised help to build a drying shed while Werdel puddled and shaped the weathered clay for a successful trial of his new kiln. Fired with enthusiasm, my beloved had bored me to sleep these past few nights with explanations of how to turn quicklime into mortar.

I swung my bucket idly by its rope handle. 'You've been baking bread this morning?' Zigrida had a smudge of flour by the spray of colourful flowers embroidered around the laces of her sober green bodice.

'What's it to you?' She cocked her head on one side.

I hefted the bucket. 'Water for you today in return for a loaf or so?'

Zigrida laughed. 'Fresh bread will cost you more than a few pails.' A frown deepened her wrinkles as she pursed thin lips. 'You can give me an afternoon in my garden, helping with the fruit canes.'

I shook my head in mock consternation. 'You drive a hard bargain.'

'Then do your own baking, my girl.' Her smile lifted a generation from her laughing eyes.

I waved a hand in capitulation. 'I'll get some water and then I'll call round for the bread.'

Zigrida nodded and disappeared within her own doors. I headed for the nearby outcrop of rock offering plentiful clean water from one of Kellarin's many springs. It was a pleasant walk. Halcarion's blessing loaded the knot of trees around the wellspring with richly scented blossom as soon as the Winter Hag had quit her watch. Maewelin hadn't disputed the Moon Maiden's authority with late frosts or sudden storms and even people who barely paid lip service to either goddess had celebrated all the traditional rites of thanks at the recent Equinox.

With winter keeping everyone close to home and making improvements, a broad stone basin had been built around the spring so I didn't have to wait long before I could dip my pail beside busy goodwives and less eager maidens about their mothers' bidding. I sympathised with the sullen faces; I'd walked out on hearth and home at much the same age, fleeing the drudgery of service to someone else's whims and malice, buoyed up with all the ignorant confidence of youth. But I hadn't sulked about my errands when I had been my mother's least reliable housemaid. I'd taken any chance to get out of the house, to learn more about life and pocket any coin I could win with a smile or a jest.

'Livak, good morning to you.' One of the bustling women nodded approval at my brimming bucket. 'Wash day at last, is it?'

That immediately raised my hackles. 'Not that I know of, Midda. Tell me, you haven't heard who it is setting up as a laundress, have you?'

Midda looked puzzled. 'No.'

'Oh well,' I shrugged. 'Still, if you come across her, pass the word that I'll be on her doorstep with a hefty bundle every market day.'

I smiled but Midda was frowning at the thought that something might be going on that hadn't reached her ears. With luck, once she set about interrogating her gossips, the spreading word would prompt some woman or other to set up her own wash tubs to steal a march on my mythical would-be laundress.

Mind, I'd still have to find some way to pay for someone to do my washing. I felt a little mildewed as I walked back, swinging the bucket to see how far I could tilt it before I risked slopping the water. There was a sizeable share of what little coin the colony boasted secure in

a coffer beneath our bedroom floorboards but that was precious little use to me. Work was the currency of Kellarin and it was Ryshad's skills that were putting credit in our ledger to buy me the prettiest plates from the potters or the softest blankets bright from the looms.

It wasn't as if I didn't have talents of my own but there was just precious little scope for them. I could usually find a friendly game of runes or someone happy to play the White Raven against my Forest Birds to while away an evening but these placid craftsmen and farmers weren't in the habit of laying bets against their luck with the fate sticks, and after the first half season or so, were hardly inclined to wager against my chances of driving their raven clear off the game board.

I lifted the bucket and cupped myself a drink of water. Halcarion save me but I'd hand over that whole coffer of coin for a decent cask of wine. Mind you, I thought wryly, I wasn't the only one fed up with water and ale. Whatever fruit Zigrida's canes might produce after my untutored ministrations wasn't destined for pies; she'd told me as much. But fruit cordials would never match the velvety seduction of Angovese red or the aromatic coolness of Ferl River whites.

That idle thought prompted another that stopped me in my tracks. Aft-spring's winds would soon bring ships and it was a safe bet they'd carry trifles and trinkets to tempt the colonists as well as the necessities of life we couldn't yet make for ourselves. Traders from Tormalin would be wanting coin on the barrelhead, not unquantifiable promises of bartered labour. If I found some opportunity to set people like Midda fretting about that, I might get more takers for my money staked against their sweat. Come to that, traders in an anchorage without any of the usual amusements would probably be only too eager for a casual game of runes. It would take more than a winter's idleness to leave my fingers too stiff to lighten some Zyoutessela merchant's purse.

My spirits rose as a new notion occurred to me. Those ships would surely be carrying wine. If I bought up as much as I could, I'd have something better to trade for goods and services than the donkey work I'd been taking on, just so I wasn't sitting on my hands and living off Ryshad's efforts. I wasn't about to do that here in Kellarin, any more than I'd have taken his coin to be called his whore back home.

Those same ships could take letters back to Tormalin for me. I considered how I might have them carried to the more distant trading centres of Relshaz and Peorle. As sworn man to D'Olbriot, Ryshad had had the right to use the Imperial Despatch and I wondered if they ever carried any unofficial correspondence for men who'd left their Prince's service. In the right places, I had friends who could ship an entire cargo of wines and liquors across the ocean with my name branded on every barrel. If I became the woman the colony turned to for its wine, where might that lead me?

Feet marching in ragged step behind me interrupted such speculations. Midda and her friends scattered like hens in a farmyard, white aprons fluttering, sweeping skirts aside lest some heedless soldier tread on their hems. Not that Ryshad would have called this rabble soldiers and even Halice would have admitted they were barely worth a mercenary's hire. I picked up my pace a little as the unshaven mob passed me to halt milling around outside Deglain's door with the usual unfocused malice of a gang of drunks.

'Deg! Hey, Deg, we didn't finish our game!'

That was a voice I recognised and one I didn't like. Peyt hadn't taken the hint when Halice had offered to pay him off the previous autumn, suggesting he head back for more profitable wars, as so many other mercenaries had done once the colony had thrived unmolested for a full year.

Most of those warriors who'd stayed had taken up old trades like Deglain or turned unskilled hands to hunting and foraging in the woods, stripping bark from felled trees for the tanners, hauling cut lumber to wherever the next house was being built. There was more than

enough work to go around, after all. But I couldn't recall Peyt and his cronies lifting a finger, not beyond grudgingly using cudgels on fleeing rats when the sheaves stooked in the new fields won from the forest had been taken for threshing. For all their supposed skill with blades, they'd shirked Aft-Autumn's gory cull of the pigs, sheep and cattle we had no fodder to see through the winter. Ryshad had been scathing in his contempt for Peyt more than once, likening him to one of the fat black leeches lurking in the swampy stretch of land to the east. The only work I'd seen the idle bastard do since the turn of the year was drowning the few hound pups too sickly to find takers, once Ryshad had pointed out to Temar that Vithrancel could do without any pack of masterless dogs.

I reached my own gate and, once inside, latched it carefully, alert to the swelling murmurs, picking out accents from gutters all the way from Toremal clear across to the Great Forest. The door across the way burst open.

'You shut your mouth before I shut it for you!' Deglain's bellow rang out before his voice was lost beneath a flurry of voices, some calming, some goading.

'No one's looking for trouble here-', said one unlikely optimist.

'Peyt only says it like he sees it.' That interruption was larded with malicious expectation. 'She looks a well-thumbed lass to me.'

The ragged ring of men spread out to corral two figures now circling each other.

'I'd carve a slice off her ham,' someone agreed with the misplaced earnestness of the truly drunk.

I moved to lean against the fence as a growing number of people from nearby houses emerged to do the same.

'Her thighs open like a gate on a windy day.' The speaker squared up to Deglain, smiling nastily as he made an ostentatious adjustment to his groin. He was a rangy man with a few days' growth of beard shadowing a hatchet face beneath slicked back, oily black locks. His red, embroidered clothes had once been expensive but rough living and worse table manners had left them bagged and stained. 'I'm not the only one who's combed her quiff.'

A cackling laugh at the back raised the old mercenaries' toast. 'Here's to loose women and well-fitting boots!'

'You're a lying bastard, Peyt.' Deglain took a step closer and Peyt backed away. Deglain was a few fingers shorter but broader across the shoulder and with plenty of muscle beneath the fat that a winter of leisure had left padding him. He was wearing no more than a shirt and tan breeches and the slight breeze flattened the fine linen to outline his solid bulk. His blunt face was twisted in a scowl, thick brows all but lost in his unruly brown hair.

'She's the one carrying the bastard and you're the fool letting her father it on you,' taunted Peyt. 'But you're welcome to my leavings, if you can stomach them.'

'I'll make you eat horseshit for spreading such lies!' One of Catrice's brothers forced his way through the crowd, face scarlet with rage, all youthful long limbs like a heron on stilts. One of Peyt's cronies tripped him and the youth went sprawling to unsympathetic laughter. But Glane hadn't come alone and an angry lad punched the man with a deft fist brutal in his kidneys. Some colonists were picking up mercenary tricks.

'Saedrin's stones!' The man buckled at the knees and was surprisingly slow to get up. Seeing Peyt distracted, Deglain stepped in with an uppercut solid enough to rattle the mercenary's teeth. But it wasn't enough to fell him. Clean living among the colonists had made Deglain forget how hard and fast a mercenary fights and he was a breath too slow in stepping back. Peyt drove a swift, instinctive punch into his belly and with a noise half groan, half curse, Deglain doubled over.

'Go back to your little hammers,' Peyt sneered. 'You fight like a cat with gloves on.'

He looked for the adulation of his hangers-on but he was celebrating too soon. Deglain rammed a shoulder like a bullock's rump into Peyt's skinny ribs, dumping him on his arse.

‘If I had a dog as worthless as you, I’d hang him.’ He pinned his tormentor long enough for a few good blows then two others dragged him off, their boots and fists going in brutally.

The big man was holding his own against Peyt’s hangers-on with a man at either shoulder to help him, each dressed in the sombre breeches and old-fashioned jerkins of colonists. As more mercenaries stepped up to back Peyt, so men who’d just come to watch found themselves taking a stand to stop Deglain and the others being outflanked. Mild blows to ward off attack were taken as outright assault by the mercenaries for whom fighting came as naturally as breathing. Finding their attempts to defend themselves provoking vicious retaliation, the colonists rapidly abandoned restraint.

‘Are you fetching Halice?’ Zigrida was by her door, scowling disapproval at the spreading melee.

‘Let’s see how this plays out.’ I leaned against the fence that would protect the burgeoning nettles in our plot from these trampling boots well enough. My neighbours’ smug turnips were similarly defended with hurdles and hedges set to foil browsers sneaking down from the woods.

‘Mercenaries.’ Zigrida’s contempt was withering. ‘Fighting for no more reason than cats in a gutter.’

I held my tongue. Brawls were hardly uncommon in the mercenary camps I’d traversed over the years, especially at the end of a long and boring winter as the men geared themselves up for the perils and profits of a new season’s battles. Halice wouldn’t be that concerned, as long as no one suffered any real hurt. There was plenty of blood staining shirts and jerkins but no one was on the ground where boots might splinter ribs to gut a man from the inside out. Some had paired off in wrestling holds, feet digging into the dirt before sweeping forward to try and cut the foe’s legs out from under him. I saw two men falling all of a piece as neither would let go the grip they had under each other’s armpits. Scrambling apart in the dust, one offered his hand to the other, pulling him clear of Glane who was fighting his own little battle. From what I could see, he wasn’t the only colonist glad of a chance to let rip, paying back slights imagined and intentional stored up over the last few seasons.

As the swirling fight swept the pair in my direction, I recognised the mercenary Glane was punishing with lightning fast blows, heedless of the damage to his own fists. The lad would learn that lesson the hard way. His victim was a burly bruiser called Tavie, blood staining his grimy shirt as it dripped from a split lower lip. A winter’s laziness had left a belly on him like a woman scant days from childbed and he was paying a heavy price for such sloth. Then I saw Tavie decide to level the odds and reach for a dagger at his belt.

‘No you don’t!’ I snapped my fingers in Zigrida’s direction but didn’t take my eyes off the fat mercenary. Knife poised, he was advancing on the hapless Glane who at least had the sense to retreat as fast as the scuffles all around him allowed, chance sending him scuttling towards me. I scooped up a stone from a pile I’d dug from our supposed vegetable patch in an uncharacteristic fit of enthusiasm the previous autumn. I weighed the stone in my hand, hard and heavy with one jagged edge raw against my palm. Halice is the one with the height and heft to take up a sword alongside the men and make them eat their mockery. I’ve neither the skills nor the inclination so I’ve cultivated an accurate throwing arm. What I needed now was the chance to hit Tavie without braining some other fool who got in the way, and preferably before he caught up with Glane.

I saw my moment and took it. The rock hit Tavie hard in the meat of his knife arm. The distraction gave Glane an instant to gather his flagging strength and fraying nerve. The smack of his fist into the side of the mercenary’s head was clearly audible over the uproar all around and I winced.

It was Glane’s bad luck he knocked Tavie into Peyt. The fortunes of the fight had temporarily driven the tall mercenary away from Deglain. Furious he turned to find out who

had just dropped his man at his feet.

‘Fighting for your sister’s honour?’ A predatory smile curved Peyt’s lip as he leered at Glane. ‘What a waste of effort!’

‘You lay one filthy hand on my sister and I’ll cut it off.’ A treacherous break in Glane’s his voice betrayed his youth. Young enough to be stupid enough to get himself killed, he pulled out his own workaday belt knife and levelled the inadequate blade. Peyt stepped back but only far enough to scoop up the longer, sharper dagger that Tavie had dropped.

‘Tell you what, I’ll give you a turn on the spit, when I’ve beaten a bit of humility into you, see how you compare with your sister? How about I ram that oyster-sticker up your hairless arse when I’m done with it?’ I knew Peyt’s taste didn’t run to boys but the threat disconcerted the lad, just as Peyt intended. He dropped into the crouch of the practised knife fighter. I could see Glane’s hand trembling, his back to me and our fence blocking any further retreat. The boy tried to edge away. Peyt darted forward and I made my move.

My bucket of water caught the mercenary full in the face. The chill and the shock left him gasping in momentary confusion, his startled yell harsh enough to startle everyone into stillness now the first rush of enthusiasm for bloodshed was passing.

‘Glane!’ I snapped with biting emphasis. ‘Put that knife away and get yourself home.’

A nicely brought up boy, the habit of obedience to an older female voice had him turning tail before recollection of his manly duty prompted him to go and hide behind Deglain instead.

Deprived of his target as he scraped sodden hair out of his eyes, Peyt turned an ugly scowl on me. ‘Livak! You pox-ridden bitch!’

‘Good morning to you too.’ I smiled at him. ‘I saw you hadn’t bathed yet, so I thought I’d save you the trouble of fetching your own water.’

He jabbed a menacing finger at me. ‘I’ll give you trouble, rag-mop.’

‘You don’t want to do that,’ I assured him, still smiling. The fence was high enough that Peyt would have to vault it to get at me and I’d be inside the house and bolting the door before he got a foot on the palings.

‘Who’s going to stop me?’ Peyt took a menacing step towards me. Everyone else abandoned their scuffles to watch this new entertainment. ‘Where’s your man? How about a torn smock from me to teach you your place is on your back and lifting your heels?’

‘You lay a finger on her and I’ll make you eat your own stones,’ snarled Deglain but Peyt’s cronies were a solid barrier between him and me.

I looked past Peyt and smiled. ‘Thanks all the same, Deg, but Peyt’s got to learn that size really doesn’t matter.’

Peyt’s glower turned into an unpleasant smirk, as aware as anyone else that he topped me by a head and more. ‘I think you’ll find it does, you draggle-arsed whore.’

I shook my head, taunting him with mock disappointment. ‘When are you going to learn, Peyt?’

He was within a stride of the fence now, face intent like a fox with a mouse in its sights. ‘Learn what?’

I took a pace back to keep him coming. ‘Which women are good for more than easing the ache in your breeches. We can take care of ourselves.’

‘You’re backing yourself against me?’ He barked a curt laugh. ‘That’s worth a prince’s ransom!’

Then Halice punched him hard in the back of the head. Before he could recover enough to think of raising his knife, she had one hand twisted in his lank black hair, jerking his head back to apply an expert stranglehold all the more effectively with her other arm. Much the same height and with broader shoulders, she had no trouble holding him.

‘No, but I’ll back Halice against you any day from Solstice to Equinox,’ I told Peyt. The

fury in his eyes faded to an instant of panic and then to bitter blankness as Halice choked him senseless. Zigrida's grandson was wide eyed and out of breath behind her and I winked at the child who scurried back to his grandam.

Halice dropped the limp, unconscious Peyt to the ground. 'Dump him in his bed and when he wakes up - if he wakes up - he can come to me and take his punishment for this little nonsense.' She turned to scowl at the shifty crowd, none of whom dared challenge her authority. 'When you've dumped him, get yourselves down to the riverside and tell Minare I sent you. If you're idle enough to be this stupid, he'll make use of you. Move it!' Her words goaded the mercenaries into a hasty retreat. Peyt half carried, half dragged away, by two of his cronies.

Halice turned her scorching glare on the colonists, dark eyes hard and unreadable. 'You don't have better things to do than this?' She bent to pick up Peyt's fallen dagger and threw it to me.

I picked the knife out of the air and idly tossed it a few times. That should remind people I wasn't just some insipid little twirl Ryshad kept to warm his sheets. Everyone instantly remembered ten tasks requiring immediate attention and took themselves off.

'Halice -' Deglain stepped forward, twisting grazed knuckles in the palm of his other hand, teeth marks plain on his forearm. Glane hovered behind him, bruises darkening on cheek and forehead.

'I'll see to you later.' Halice shaded her promise with threat, holding Deglain's gaze until he turned away. Squaring his shoulders, he ushered Glane towards his house where Catrice waited on the threshold, buttercup yellow shawl pressed to her tear-stained face.

Halice rubbed a broad hand over the dun-coloured hair she kept cropped as short as any other soldier. Now there was only me to see, her coarse-featured face turned amiable. 'I may as well take an early lunch since I'm here. You can tell me what that was all about while we eat.'



*The Island City of Hadrumal,
15th of Aft-Spring*

'Do you suppose there are many of those dust-ups between mercenaries and colonists?'

The speaker was a wiry man with thoughtful brown eyes and a reddish beard worn close trimmed, whose sparse sandy hair was cut so brutally short it was nigh on invisible. He was young to have gone all but bald, much of an age with his companion still boasting a full head of black hair, long enough to reach his shoulders if he were to untie the scrap of leather holding it back. The two men shared a sinewy build but that was as far as any similarity went. The dark-haired man had a sallow complexion and was noticeably taller than his companion whose fair skin showed freckles as they emerged from the shadow of a doorway into the early morning sun.

'Livak and Halice looked to have everything well in hand.' Breezily confident, he stuck his hands into the pockets of his grass-green jerkin, a garment significantly more relaxed in cloth and cut to the sober buff of his companion's clothes.

'Livak's got more than her fair share of wits,' the sandy-haired man said thoughtfully. 'What did you make of Halice when you travelled with her?'

'She's as shrewd as she's plain faced.' The taller man smiled. 'I don't imagine there'll be

trouble with those hired swords but we can mention it if you like, if our esteemed Archmage needs some excuse for having Hadrumal send representatives to Kellarin.’ From his tone, he plainly didn’t think this would be necessary.

The two men turned off the long curve of Hadrumal’s high road and through an ancient gateway of weathered stone that pierced a tower rising dark against a still sky all but colourless with the first light of the day. Footsteps loud on the flagstones, they crossed a courtyard where most windows were still firmly shuttered, their fellow wizards not yet stirring to a new day about the age-old study of magic.

The black-haired man opened an iron-studded door on to a dark staircase. A single window at the top shed scant light on the oak treads and both men paused to accustom their eyes to the gloom. Ascending in step, obvious expectation lightening their feet, the pair exchanged a grin as the sandy-haired man rapped a brisk knuckle on the door at the top.

‘Enter.’ The summons was curt enough to startle the pair into identical looks of surprise.

The dark-haired man opened the door. ‘Archmage.’

‘Shiv.’ The man within had his back to them, standing by a table piled high with books and documents. He looked round to greet them with a brusque nod. ‘Usara. What can I do for you?’

‘We thought we’d invite you to share some breakfast with us.’ Shiv’s words tailed off into uncertainty.

‘You’re expecting someone?’ Usara didn’t hide his surprise at the Archmage’s formal robe, an expensive gown of silk as dark and glossy as a raven’s wing, arcane symbols picked out on the fronts in matt black embroidery. Planir’s hair was as black as his robes but for a touch of frost at his temples.

‘As you can see,’ the Archmage replied tersely.

Hesitation checked Shiv’s smile. ‘We wanted to discuss Kellarin.’

‘What about it?’ Planir made a neat stack of the small volumes he’d extracted from his pile of books.

‘There’ll be a lot happening there this year,’ Shiv began rather lamely. ‘The colony was set fair to expand by the end of last autumn and now we’re past Equinox, there’ll be nothing to hold them back.’

‘There’s a whole new continent to discover,’ Usara chipped in. ‘Hadrumal can offer all manner of assistance. Wizardry will make exploration far quicker and safer.’

‘That’s wizardry in general or you pair in particular?’ Planir turned shadowed grey eyes on Usara. The early light through the lancet windows made harsh angles of his clean-shaven face.

‘You know we have an interest in Kellarin, Archmage,’ the younger man said slowly.

‘Any ship wanting to make the ocean crossing needs a wizard aboard,’ Shiv shrugged. ‘It may as well be us as anyone else.’

‘I beg leave to disagree,’ said Planir with a weary hint of humour. ‘That’s a task ideally suited to mages fresh out of their apprenticeship who need a lesson in the differences between the theories they have learned and the practical application of magic.’

‘We could keep a weather eye on them from Kellarin,’ Usara suggested. ‘Use our own experience of the oceans and the coastal currents to help them.’

‘You don’t see your duty here as more important?’ The faint smile faded from Planir’s face. ‘It is customary to pay for the learning you’ve gained by passing it on, turn and turn about with your contemporaries. What about your own apprentices?’

Usara looked uncertainly at the Archmage. ‘I think we’ve taught them all we can. Equinox always means apprentices moving on to new masters, so we thought we’d be free-.’

‘Did you consider who might be planning to pass their apprentices on to you? Herion’s already mentioned two lasses he thinks would benefit from your assistance,’ Sar.’ Planir

gestured towards the long roofs of Hadrumal's buildings visible through the windows, tall towers and lesser buildings subservient to them. 'You're both of some standing in the Council now, respected among the halls. More than one mage is interested in your notions of working magic cooperatively.'

Usara opened his mouth but Planir cut him off with a curt sweep of one hand. 'Do you imagine you've learned everything Hadrumal has to teach you? I don't recall Shannet releasing you from your pupillage with her, Shiv.' He fixed the dark-haired mage with a hard look. 'What does she think of your plans? I take it you've told her?'

'No,' Shiv replied slowly. 'She hates any mention of Kellarin, as you know full well.'

'Because Viltred, love of her youth, died there and Otrick, friend of her old age, returned moribund.' Planir's eyes were flinty beneath fine black brows.

'You don't need to remind me of that,' retorted Shiv, stung.

'No?' Planir's voice was cold. 'Have the dangers that proved so fatal for them vanished?'

'Elietimm have made no move against the colony in more than a year,' said Shiv with determined composure.

'But the possibility remains, of course. Which is all the more reason to send mages with more up their sleeves than a talent for keeping a fire in overnight or picking the best place for a well,' Usara pointed out.

'They worked enough malice in the north last year, as you know better than any.' The Archmage folded his arms carefully over his robe 'Despite your success in foiling their plans, 'Sar, I don't suppose they've given up their hopes of alliance with the Mountain Men. If you're in Kellarin we could be seriously wrong-footed if we suddenly find we need the benefit of the contacts you made among the Forest Folk and the upland strongholds.'

'Whenever we've countered an Elietimm threat, they've tried something else, not the same thing again. There's been no sniff of them in the Archipelago since Ryshad exposed their conspiracies.' Shiv took a step forward. 'And the Mountain Men will be full on their guard, any fool can see that. Elietimm eyes will start looking south again. Apprentices will be hardly able to defend the colony if they attack. If we're there, we'll know what we're dealing with and how best to fight it.'

'So do you consider them a threat or not?' Planir looked puzzled. 'You just said there'd been no sign for over a year. Perhaps you should think through whatever your argument is before we discuss this further?'

Shiv coloured but didn't say anything.

'Kellarin has mercenaries and magic of its own, don't forget that.' Planir smiled thinly. 'In any case, the Tormalin Emperor and I have come to, shall we say, an agreement over Kellarin. He'll allow the colony its independence as long as Hadrumal does the same.'

Usara looked perplexed. 'I don't see the two of us threatening that.'

'Your modesty does you credit 'Sar.' Planir's tone warmed a trifle. 'Consider the reputation you have in Toremal as the mage who drove the Elietimm out of the mountains all but single-handed last year. Of course, such power and valour was only to be expected from one of the wizards who rediscovered the lost land of Kellarin the summer before that, fighting with mighty mages like the admirable Shiv to defend its people, even to the death of such worthies as Viltred.'

'I hardly think sarcasm is called for,' said Shiv curtly.

'Forgive me, I didn't mean to mock.' Planir looked tired despite the early hour. 'I appreciate you have an interest in Kellarin and close ties to people there but you can keep your weather eye on them from here.'

He glanced at Shiv who tried and failed to look innocent. 'Don't tell me you've not been scrying for them because I won't believe you. No, don't worry about it. Scry all you want as far as I'm concerned and if trouble does come floating down from the Ice Islands, then you

can give Kellarin all the assistance you want. The Emperor will be too glad of it to quibble and the first to cheer Elietimm ships burnt to the waterline with magical fire or drowned like rats in a barrel with a conjured storm.'

'I appreciate your confidence but we've no great record of success against the Elietimm enchanters,' said Shiv bitterly.

'Then wouldn't you be safer here?' queried Planir. 'You're contradicting yourself again, Shiv.'

'We're scarcely any further forward understanding aetheric magic.' Usara's frustration was evident. 'I need to work with those adept in Kellarin if I'm to make any sense of the little we've learned over the winter, if I'm ever to see how Artifice relates to wizardry. We might even see how the two magics might work together rather than stifling each other.'

'A hope I hold before the Council each and every time some sceptic calls the value of your studies into question.' Planir raised a quizzical brow. 'Surely you'll make better progress surrounded by twenty generations of learning documented in Hadrumal's libraries than struggling to fit in your studies around keeping ships away from dangerous currents and tracking lodes of ore for the colony?'

'I need to discuss my theories with the Demoiselle Guinalle,' Usara insisted. 'She's the leading adept, after all.'

'Ah yes, Guinalle.' Planir slowly inclined his head. 'But what about Aritane, 'Sar? She can't go back to her people in the mountains. These Sheltya who hold their lore, they'll assume - and rightly - that's she's told you all she knows about their ancient Aetheric magic. You told me that would mean death for her if the Sheltya ever caught her.'

'She's safe enough in Hadrumal,' said Shiv with a dismissive shrug.

Planir kept his stern gaze fixed on Usara. 'You've complained to me often enough about the scant respect she's shown, 'Sar. You hear all the arguments that Artifice is no more than some second-rate magic unworthy of Hadrumal's notice. You're going to leave Aritane to face all that alone?'

'Then she can come to Kellarin with us.' Usara was looking exasperated now.

'You've managed to persuade her?' Planir was astonished. 'I understood she sees herself as exiled to Hadrumal for life. It's the only place where she can stay hidden from Sheltya working Artifice to hunt her down, isn't it?'

'I'm sure Guinalle could protect her in Kellarin,' said Usara stiffly but his face belied his words.

'You don't think her race's ancient kinship with the Elietimm will make her even less welcome than she is here, among colonists who suffered so dreadfully at their hands?' Planir hazarded. He frowned. 'And of course, if Elietimm enchanters do seek a new target for their hatred as you suggest, Shiv, and were to attack Hadrumal for instance, then we'll find ourselves with both Guinalle and Aritane, the only two with any real knowledge of such magic and more crucially how to counter it on the far side of the ocean.'

'Why are you making so many difficulties, Archmage?' Shiv demanded bluntly.

'Why haven't you two thought through all the consequences of your actions?' snapped Planir. 'Haven't I taught you better than this? Is this notion entirely your own? Did someone else suggest it? Troanna for instance?'

'I don't answer to Troanna,' Shiv replied in the same breath as Usara's protest.

'I'm your pupil, Planir, no one else's.'

'Then why is this plan leaving you so blinkered to wider considerations,' Planir said abruptly. 'Tell me 'Sar, is your desire to see Guinalle entirely academic? You've set aside your romantic inclination for the lady?'

'No, but that doesn't interfere with my duty to Hadrumal.' Usara coloured furiously beneath his beard. 'No more than you're hampered by your attachment to Larissa.'

‘I think we’d better talk about this some other time,’ Shiv said hastily. He caught Usara by the sleeve. ‘As you say, Archmage, there are other aspects to this that we’d better consider more fully.’

He forced Usara through the door and closed it quickly as the sandy-haired wizard shook himself free with visible annoyance. They descended the stairs in mute irritation

‘What was that all about?’ Usara burst out as they reached the courtyard. ‘I know he’s been short tempered lately but that was just impossible!’

‘Maybe we just picked the wrong moment,’ Shiv said dubiously. ‘He looked dog-tired. What do you suppose is keeping him burning the midnight candles? Larissa?’

Usara shook his head. ‘She’s spending a lot less time with him. I hear the gossip is upsetting her.’

‘What did she expect, letting Planir charm her into his bed?’ There was little sympathy in Shiv’s response. ‘She’s his apprentice.’

‘He’s genuinely fond of her,’ Usara insisted

‘But she’s a diversion from his cares, not someone he’d share them with. He must miss Otrick.’ Shiv’s voice was sad as he trod on the patterned shadow cast by a leaded casement now opened to the morning air.

‘We all do,’ Usara sighed. ‘And who’s Planir got to talk to, now the old pirate’s dead?’

‘Pered doesn’t think Planir’s taken time to grieve for Otrick properly,’ Shiv observed. He grimaced. ‘I win the washing up till next market day. Pered bet me Planir wouldn’t just give us leave to go.’

Usara looked back at the Archmage’s lofty window. ‘Perhaps we should have told him the whole plan.’ His words tailed off into uncertainty.

‘We agreed we’d take it one step at a time,’ Shiv said firmly. ‘Anyway, who do you suppose is coming to see him first thing before breakfast? Maybe that’s why he was in such a contrary mood.’

They passed through the gateway and fell silent as a couple of yawning apprentices crossed their path. Usara led the way out to the less exalted buildings of the high road where Hadrumal’s tradespeople were setting about the more mundane occupations of their day.

‘What do you say to some bread and cheese?’ Shiv nodded towards a small shop whose solid shutters were now let down to form a counter stacked with flagons of water and wine and baskets piled high with rolls fresh from some nearby bakery.

‘It wouldn’t hurt to see who came and went for a chime or so,’ agreed Usara.