

Darkening Skies

Book Two of The Hadrupal Crisis Juliet E McKenna

Chapter One

Ferl, Caladhria 1st of For-Autumn In the 9th Year of Tadriol the Provident of Tormalin

He stood alone in the centre of the high hammer-beamed hall. Those barons already assembled sat on tiered benches of polished oak rising up on either side

Afternoon sunlight poured through the wide arched windows piercing the thick stone walls. Their sills were level with the heads of those later arrivals forced to take the highest, rearmost seats. Some lords leaned forward, intent on studying Corrain's expression. Others sat back as they conferred with their neighbours. Some went so far as to shield their mouths with cautious hands.

Corrain turned around and walked back to the great double doors. 'Fitrel, I want you making the rounds of the taverns and stable yards.'

He handed a discreet purse to the older man; a grizzled veteran already pensioned off before direst necessity had recalled him to his livery.

'Buy a little ale to moisten some tongues. I want to know who's turned up and their principle alliances and feuds.'

When Corrain had been a Halferan barony guard captain, he would have been out and about all night to learn such vital information before the first sitting of a quarterly parliament. He'd had no such opportunity since they'd arrived the previous evening. Besides, such behaviour was hardly fitting for a man now claiming the barony's title for himself.

Fitrel nodded comfortably. 'I should still have some acquaintance among their noble lordships' households.'

Corrain thought it all too likely that Fitrel's one-time comrades would be fishing on some distant river bank. If they hadn't already died and been reborn, oblivious, into the Otherworld. But Corrain had precious few strings to his bow and Fitrel could surely make new friends.

There would doubtless be a good many folk hereabouts eager to learn the true story of the corsair raid that had seen the former Baron Halferan murdered, the best of his household guard slaughtered and the remnant enslaved. Until Corrain had escaped and returned to renew the fight against the corsairs this summer.

'What do I do?' Reven demanded.

'You keep your voice down,' Fitrel rebuked the youth.

Corrain held the lad's gaze. 'You uphold the honour of Halferan.'

He had no doubts about the boy's loyalty but, Saedrin save them all, Reven was as unpredictable as a colt freshly broken to harness and none too skilfully broken at that.

This was no time to lament fat old Arigo's death though. Those most eminent lords who'd sent lackeys to hold them a place on the foremost benches were arriving.

'Yes, captain,' the boy said hurriedly.

'Baron Halferan,' Fitrel barked.

Corrain heard a muffled chuckle from somewhere on the upper benches. It wasn't an amiable sound. 'Be off with you both.'

'You keep your head and you'll do right by our lady,' Fitrel assured Corrain, 'and for our lord's girls.'

Corrain saw the puzzlement on a late-come baron's face as he overheard those words. Realisation turned the man's bemusement to contempt.

'I will.' Corrain clapped the old swordsman on the shoulder by way of farewell.

Guards in the Ferl barony's blue jerkins waved Fitrel and Reven back so that the last

lords could enter before ushering them out. The door wards' polished bronze belt buckles reflected the chevrons on Baron Ferl's standard flying high above the hall.

This town of Ferl hosted the parliament sufficiently often for the local barons to have built this hall to house it. Corrain had visited often enough in his dead lord's service to take full advantage of festival licence at solstice or equinox.

What muddy footprints had he left here? Corrain was uneasily aware that he'd been too easily tempted into heedless follies, ever since those days when Fitrel had first ruled the barrack hall as sergeant-at-arms. He wondered what tales these assembled lords had heard. Their own faithful retainers were doubtless out gleaning gossip in the back alleys and taprooms.

Comment [JeMcK1]: This has been hyphenated previously.

He turned to face the barons. Who would prove determined to curb the unseemly ambition of an erstwhile guard captain? Who among them would believe that his first and last desire was now to serve Lady Zurenne, the Widow Halferan, and her noble daughters Ilysh and Esnina?

Since Corrain had so grievously failed his murdered lord, this was all the restitution he could make. Since his quest for revenge on the corsairs had gone so perilously awry. Not that anyone here knew that, any more than they knew the whole truth of Lord Halferan's death. Corrain must keep all those secrets, for his own sake as much as for Zurenne's and her daughters.

His face impassive, he took a stride towards the steps up to the rear benches.

'A moment—' Baron Ferl's outrage foundered the instant he stood up. Everyone could see he didn't know what to call this interloper.

Corrain halted and bowed to the baron.

An expectant murmur swirled around the hall.

Corrain didn't say a word.

Settling his stance comfortably, he gazed at the great window at the far end of the long hall. Soaring stone tracery framed a multitude of diamond leaded panes. Bright heraldic hues coloured the outermost edges, casting jewelled patterns on the pale stone floor. Not that any individual lord's blazon was honoured. Every noble had an equal voice in this parliament.

Then let one of them speak first. Corrain had been in enough sword fights to know the wisdom of letting his opponent make the first move. He had also stood sentry outside baronial halls long and often enough for him to wager good gold that he would outlast the noble lords in this particular trial. He began counting the different coloured panes of glass.

Baron Ferl took refuge in pomposity. 'You are welcome, my lords, to our proud parliament. Thus we honour our forefathers who bequeathed us this sacred duty; to safeguard the interests of Caladhrians from the highest rank to the humblest.'

Recovering his composure, he laced his fingers across his paunch.

'We are not subject to the whims of monarchs. We do not forget how the ancient Tormalin dominion was brought low in generations past by arrogance and fallibility on their Emperor's throne. Nor are we ruled by greed and selfishness. Not when we see the merchants' guilds, accountable only to their own purses, oppress the city states and fiefdoms of Ensaimin.'

Comment [JeMcK2]: ancient the Tormalin dominion' ? as per your insertion?
Not getting what you're intending here.
I'll go with 'the ancient Tormalin dominion' if we must but would prefer to 'stet'

No, Corrain thought bitterly as the baron droned on. Caladhria has this parliament that's so seldom able to agree that every household would still lit by candles if the parliament had ever been asked to debate the merits of oil lamps.

The bare minimum number of barons required to ratify a parliamentary decree could argue every facet of the simplest question for the full five days of a festival without ever coming within bowshot of a conclusion

The Tormalin Emperor would have sent his legions if the corsairs had raided his shores. The Ensaimin guilds would have hired mercenaries to wreak their bloody vengeance.

Caladhria's barons sat on their fat arses and bickered over who should bear the cost of defending their coasts while better men like Lord Halferan died in the attempt.

But he must not betray any such anger, Corrain reminded himself. The fight with the corsairs was behind him, or so he fervently hoped. He must look to the future. To secure Lady Zurenne and her daughters' future.

'Though this parliament has been called out of season—' Baron Ferl glanced at Corrain as he concluded '— let us conduct our debates with courtesy and reason.'

Corrain looked down at the slave shackle fastened around his off-hand wrist, a short length of broken chain dangling from it. That prompted another frisson along the baronial benches. Backs straightened, light summer cloaks rustled and booted feet shuffled on the oak planks.

He'd already heard three different versions of the oath that he had supposedly sworn and two other rumours as to why he still wore the manacle and had refused to cut his hair, even if he now wore it tamed in a tight braid hanging down his back.

Let them ask, if they dared. Corrain wouldn't tell them. That was between him and his dead lord and no one else, not even a god.

Still no one spoke. Quelling an impulse to a humourless smile, Corrain contemplated the distant window. That didn't stop him tallying up the headcount with discreet sideways glances.

Three hundred, give or take a handful. Definitely more than half of the five hundred or so barons required to safeguard the interests of the obedient artisans, yeomen and labourers in return for their unquestioning fealty. So any decree passed here would be binding in law.

How many might decide in his favour? Corrain knew that his noble opponents would have summoned as many inclined to oppose him as they possibly could, despatching the courier doves able to carry a message so much more quickly than a mounted man. That

would have given such hostile lords more time to travel to Ferl than those summoned in the usual fashion.

On the other side of those scales, his foes had betrayed themselves with their haste to summon this parliament out of season. The decree demanding his attendance had been a disgrace; ink smudged on the parchment and half the requisite twenty five wax seals crooked or blurred.

The decree which had arrived so late, giving him so little time to get here. Well, these noble lords might balk at night travel under anything less than both moons at their full but no guardsman could be so timid. Corrain and his men had often ridden, as now, under the full of the Greater Moon alone.

A balding baron rose to his feet, on one of the higher benches. 'I propose the first question for debate is whether we need to be here at all.'

An exasperated nobleman promptly stood up on the other side of the hall. 'I support the proposal. It's not forty days since we assembled in Kevil at summer solstice. Why are we called away from our harvests and herds at this busiest of seasons?'

That provoked a sharp riposte from a lord on the bench below. 'Congratulations, my lord of Cathalet, on having harvests and herds to concern you. Those of us closer to the southern coasts have seen our fields go unplanted and our beasts sold or slaughtered to deny the raiders their plunder.

Corrain was relieved to see a good number nodding their agreement with Baron Aveis.

He had hoped as much. Ferl was one of Caladhria's more southerly towns. Those nobles living hereabouts would all have seen the suffering of commoners fleeing from those coastal baronies attacked by the corsairs from the southern islands.

He had seen the knots of men and women in the doorways of taverns and merchants' warehouses, some avid with curiosity, some apprehensive. This was no routine parliament,

conducting its business while the townsfolk went about their own concerns.

The locals couldn't console themselves with their distance from the sea any longer. Everyone had heard how, this very For-Spring, those dread black ships had sailed up the river Dyal in Lescar. Their own Ferl River was navigable all the way to this town that shared its name.

'The raiders have gone,' a noble with a florid complexion said scornfully. He gestured briefly at Corrain. 'I gather we have this man to thank. His claim to the title of Baron Halferan may hardly be seemly but he has married the rightful heiress so confirmation seems a simple enough gesture of gratitude. Let us be done with the business and go home!'

Corrain tensed. Could it be so simple? Would he be back on the road to Halferan the very next day, confirmed as legal guardian to Lady Zurenne and her daughters?

Would he truly have escaped these noble lords' questions as to exactly why the corsairs had vanished so suddenly? And worse, secured the coastal barons' gratitude, for succeeding where his own dead lord had failed. For persuading the Archmage of Hadrumal to help them, by telling them where the raiders would land so that the Caladhrians could lie in wait to burn their ships.

He had told that lie to protect Halferan. Now he must stand by it. At least until he was confirmed as baron in his dead lord's place. Then Lady Zurenne and her daughters would be protected under Caladhrian law, even if Archmage Planir brought the wrath of Hadrumal down on his head, undeniably guilty of telling and perpetuating that untruth and more besides.

Lord Licanin rose to his feet from the bench on Corrain's sword hand. Steely-haired and wrinkled though far from his dotage, he regarded Baron Karpis opposite with measured dislike.

Karpis was perhaps ten years younger, his prime softening into fat disguised by his

chestnut doublet's expensive tailoring. Corrain wondered if an apothecary's dye bottle was responsible for the matching colour of the baron's carefully pomaded locks.

'My noble lords,' Lord Licanin began.

Before he could say another word, something crashed into the hall's great wooden doors. A steely clash of blades outside cut through the booming reverberation.

Noble voices rose in disbelief and indignation

'What is going on?'

'Where are the Ferl troopers?'

'Is it corsairs?'

Corrain stared at the shivering door. Could it possibly be corsairs? Of all the men gathered here, he alone knew what resources the raiders might now have to call on. Had he truly brought that disaster upon Caladhria?

Or was he about to face the Archmage's wrath? Because the wizards of Hadrumal knew that Corrain was responsible for summoning the vile sorcerer who had really destroyed the raiders. Before the treacherous bastard had decided to claim the corsairs' island lair for his own.

The Mandarkin wizard Anskal might have promised to spare Caladhria any future raids but Corrain had no faith in wizards. His own dead lord had trusted a renegade mage and that had been the death of him.

The wicket door flew open and a man fell headlong through it. He scrambled to his feet, one of the Ferl gate wards.

The man had a bloodied nose and a swelling eye. His sword was still in its scabbard though and that clash of blades outside hadn't been repeated. It was only a common brawl, Corrain realised.

Then he heard young Reven shouting incomprehensible abuse. A moment later the lad

choked on a yell of pain.

Corrain was out through the door inside a handful of long strides. He saw a man in a dun jerkin standing over Reven, ready to plant a boot in his ribs.

Grabbing the man by his shoulders Corrain flung him away. Taken wholly unawares, the man reeled backwards down the steps of the hall's grand portico.

Reven had given a decent account of himself before the blow that had felled him, Corrain noted. The man had a split lip and a bloodied nose.

Regardless, he hauled the bleary-eyed lad to his feet by the front of his already torn shirt. He shook him with all the frustration he couldn't turn on those cursed nobles cowering in their parliament.

'What fool's game are you playing? Where is Sergeant Fitrel?'

Reven pointed with a wavering hand. Appalled, Corrain saw the old man in the midst of the fracas. It seemed that all the Halferan guards were intent on beating some Karpis retainers in crimson jerkins senseless.

'Stand down!' Corrain thanked all the gods whom he didn't believe in that he could still call up a guard captain's razor-edged tones. 'Halferan, form up!'

Anger gave his words such steely authority that three of the Karpis men stood to attention before they realised what they were doing.

The Halferans in their pewter livery withdrew to the other side of the hall's broad entrance. Corrain swiftly assessed their injuries. At least he saw nothing worse than bruises, bloody scrapes and torn clothing. Better yet, the Halferans had inflicted far more hurts than they'd suffered on the Karpis men.

He caught Fitrel's eye. The grizzled swordsman could only see out of one. The other was already swelling shut.

'Report, sergeant,' Corrain growled.

‘Captain!’ Reven spoke up from the pillar he was leaning on. ‘You didn’t hear what they’ve been saying.’ The boy could barely restrain himself. ‘Mocking every one of us, aye and saying such vileness about Halferan’s ladies—’ He broke off, colouring furiously.

Corrain could imagine what stable yard filth had been flung. Hard-riding troopers wouldn’t bother with tactful enquiries about his frankly scandalous marriage. Lascivious speculation about young Lady Ilysh’s performance on her wedding night would have been the least of it.

‘How can some erstwhile guardsman manage the myriad tenants and complex affairs of a barony?’

Corrain wheeled around to see the great hall’s doors now standing open, revealing the barons crowding the entrance. Some were wide-eyed with curiosity. More betrayed distaste as they contemplated his dishevelment. Corrain’s exertions had left his doublet wrenched askew and the shirt beneath had come untucked.

‘He will never command the respect of men he rode with as a common trooper. Look at them, scuffling in the streets. Drunk, like as not.’

Now he saw who was talking. Baron Karpis had raised his voice to carry far beyond his immediate companion.

Scorning Halferan when Karpis men had started this fight. Deliberately too, Corrain didn’t doubt that, not after Reven’s account.

Could he convince the parliament that this scuffle had been provoked? Would it do any good for Halferan’s cause, even if he did?

Would he be back on the road tomorrow, returning to tell Lady Zurenne how utterly he had failed her?

Chapter Two

Comment [JeMcK3]: I seem to have got rid of the extra page in the final version – we need to make sure this is carried over okay.

Taw Ricks Hunting Lodge, Caladhria

1st of For-Autumn

‘Do we know when the—’ Doratine’s pencil hovered over her slate ‘—when he’ll be home?’

At which time, presumably, they would all know what to call Corrain. Zurenne shook her head.

‘There’s no way of knowing how long this parliament will last. But he’ll send a messenger ahead when they’re on their way. If he doesn’t?’ She shrugged. ‘He and the guardsmen will have to make do with whatever meat and bread may be found.’

‘Should I prepare for other guests?’ Doratine’s shaking pencil betrayed her with a shrill squeak on the slate. ‘Lord Licanin?’

‘You have your menus. You may go.’ Zurenne spoke more curtly than she’d intended.

How dare Doratine even hint that the parliament would insist on her sister’s husband remaining as Halferan’s guardian?

However grateful they might be for Lord Licanin’s undoubted aid and indeed, his own guardsmen’s sacrifice, when the corsairs had attacked. Lady Ilysh was her father’s rightful heir. Zurenne had married her to Corrain with every legality observed in the Halferan manor’s own shrine. The parliament could not ignore their own laws, even if Lysha was barely old enough to be blooded by Drianon.

And Corrain had sworn to Zurenne on that same altar, before the goddess of home and motherhood, that the marriage would be in name only, to ensure that she and her daughters would never again be subject to some unwanted guardian’s unchallengeable authority.

But it never did to be on bad terms with the servants. Zurenne managed a conciliatory

smile. 'You have my authority to tell Master Rauffe to buy whatever you wish at the Genlis market.'

'Thank you, my lady.' Doratine curtsayed and hurried from the room.

Though of course that made it all the more likely that Master Rauffe would knock on her door with some veiled complaint that Doratine had stepped on his toes. They were forever encroaching on each other's jealously guarded responsibilities.

Zurenne allowed herself an exasperated sigh. Halferan Manor had been big enough to accommodate them all separately. Doratine's spacious chamber had been the most favoured of the servants' rooms above the storehouses beyond the kitchen and its range of buildings. Master Rauffe and his wife had enjoyed the steward's comfortable dwelling beside the barrack hall and opposite the baronial tower.

All that lay in ruins. Now the entire household was crammed into this modest lodge, only ever intended for seasonal visits by the baron, his chosen guests and their handpicked servants.

Zurenne reminded herself to be thankful that some long-dead Baron Halferan had substantially extended the original timber and plastered-brick building. That had only offered a single wide hall with this sitting room and its adjoining bedchamber to the rear and a garret above for servants.

She looked at her needlework laid ready on a polished marquetry table. She had been delighted to find the delicate piece in that furnishing warehouse, when she had fled to Claithe in search of some comforts after her first few miserable days here.

Besides, she had told herself, the barony's reputation would benefit from the merchants seeing her composed and prosperous. Everyone would see that whatever their sufferings, Halferan had survived the corsairs' attacks. Now all their travails lay in the past.

So she had scattered the Archmage's blood money like a ploughboy sowing seed. She

had bought Relshazri joinery, pottery from Peorle, fine wools and linens carried south by merchant ships from Col, Trebin lace and buttons from Duryea. Pewter and brass wares for the kitchen and servants' hall all the way from Wrede in northern Ensaimin.

Now her purchases looked as out of place here as she was. This lodge had been decorated throughout with a practical eye to the hazards of mud and worse consequences of a day's hunting with horses, hawks and hounds.

The frivolous chairs that framed the round table looked positively foolish beside the scarred wooden settles intended for guests taking their ease in breeches and boots after a long day at the chase. The costly new carpet in front of the cavernous, soot-darkened fire place was almost as ridiculous.

Besides, no amount of frills and fancies could distract Zurenne from the constant reminders of her beloved husband's presence here, reminding her wherever she looked that he was never to return.

The scars on the stone door jamb showed where he'd been accustomed to sharpen his knife while waiting for a groom to bring him his horse. He had inked the map in the entrance hall showing the different chases through the local forests with his annual tallies of deer and boar.

Zurenne picked up a book of Tormalin poetry. She had bought it in hopes of distraction after her daughters had been sent to bed and before they woke in the mornings. Now it reminded her too readily of that small stock of thoughtful books which she'd found on a shelf in the bedchamber, debating the natural philosophy of birds and beasts.

It was so easy to imagine her beloved sitting and reading in quiet candlelight, pleasantly weary after a day on horseback, well fed on venison or game birds. Zurenne had never begrudged him his visits here, his escape from the burdens of his barony.

Tears, so often a threat, even so long after his death, welled in her eyes.

A peremptory knock on the door startled her into dropping the book of poems.

‘My lady?’

‘Mistress Rauffe.’ Zurenne braced herself as the door opened.

The steward’s wife was as thickset and uncompromising as her husband was lean and jovial.

‘My lady.’ She curtsied. ‘I was wondering if you have given any further thought to my proposal?’

‘I have,’ Zurenne said firmly, ‘and it is out of the question.’

‘My lady.’ Mistress Rauffe curtsied again. ‘It is hardly seemly for the household lackeys and the maidservants to be living in adjoining rooms. If my husband and I were to take—’

‘I would have thought you would be grateful to have a room to yourselves, even one so small.’ So they would be, Zurenne was sure, if the former storeroom between the scullery and the kitchen wasn’t right next to the other one which had been cleared out for Doratine’s use.

‘Everyone else is forced together like beans in a pod. You cannot see the floors for sleeping pallets.’ She swept a hand towards the current great hall, built on the lodge’s eastern face with all the florid ugly stonework of generations long past. Her other hand carried the gesture across towards the guest suites on the other side of the original hall, now the lodge’s entrance. The servants’ rooms that Mistress Rauffe coveted sat across the corridor from those suites.

‘The kitchen wing is the newest building here.’ Zurenne had to blink away more tears. Her own husband had commissioned a devotee of Tormalin rational architecture to design the clean-cut wing, after she had pointed out the deficiencies of the earlier additions on her first visit here after their marriage. ‘You will be warmer than anyone else, as the season turns to Aft-Autumn.’

Zurenne really didn't want to imagine what the rest of the demesne servants would endure once For-Winter arrived, crammed into the extended garrets beneath the lodge's mismatched rooflines.

'Very well, my lady.' Mistress Rauffe curtsied a third time but Zurenne knew better than to take that as a sign of acquiescence.

Sure enough, the woman insisted on the last word as she went out into the entrance hall. 'Perhaps we can discuss it further when the baron arrives.'

Zurenne longed to call her back, to demand which baron she meant. Corrain, confirmed as Baron Halferan? Or did the steward and his wife truly believe that the parliament would refuse his claim in favour of Lord Licanin.

But she let the woman leave. This haphazard household wouldn't run half as smoothly without Mistress Rauffe's brisk attention to a myriad practical details and her talent for getting the very best work from the most dilatory maid.

Zurenne told herself firmly that was only the couple's former loyalties talking. After all, they had come to Halferan from Licanin, after their lord had so belatedly learned of the abuses which Zurenne, her daughters and the barony had suffered at the hands of that scoundrel Master Minelas with his forged claim to their guardianship.

After the villain had murdered her husband and no one had come to her aid for a year and more. After the neighbouring barons of Karpis and Tallat had given that supposed grant only the most spurious examination, doubtless bought off with coin stolen from Halferan's own coffer.

All at once, Zurenne was paralysed by terrifying memories. Of Minelas intercepting her letters. Of him dictating the lies she must write to her sisters. Of him wringing the necks of Halferan's courier doves in front of her. Of the threats the usurper had made, as he plundered her daughters' inheritance; to wed and bed Ilysh himself with all the violence he clearly

relished. Of the ruffians he had hired to replace her husband's honest guardsmen. Of the way those evil men had kept Zurenne a prisoner in her own home, even after Minelas himself had departed on whatever business had proved to be the death of him. But even that hadn't brought her salvation.

She came to her senses and looked afresh around the cluttered, inhospitable room. Once again, tears threatened, now with a headache pressing close behind.

Zurenne longed to leave but there were no gardens to walk in here, only kennel yards and stables and a deer park beyond. Besides, as soon as she stepped outside the dour sanctuary of this sitting room, she would be besieged by the expectant gazes of those who'd survived Halferan Manor's destruction. When would their true lady, their beloved lord's daughter lead them home to rebuild?

Doratine wasn't the only one who would struggle to address Corrain as new Baron Halferan when the parliament was obliged to grant him that honour. Everyone knew that the marriage was a convenient fiction to keep the barony out of another outsider's hands. They persisted in their old allegiance and looked to Ilysh as her father's true heir.

Which was exactly as it should be. Zurenne drew a resolute breath and surveyed the plastered walls above the walnut panelling. She wouldn't remove any reminders of her husband's presence here, not even those ugly trophies wrought from the antlers of prized deer. No matter how lacerating she found daily recollection of their companionship, of the consolations of their marriage bed, of their shared joy in their beloved daughters.

Nor would she yield to the nightmares that persisted after she woke alone, night after night in the silent darkness. The fear that the parliament's barons would somehow rule against Corrain and hand her and her children to some other guardian. She could not stand the thought of even one as benign as Lord Licanin.

Zurenne's hand strayed to the triangular silver pendant on its ribbon around her neck.

Adorned with her private sigil made from the upright runes shown on the bones rolled at her birth, the Archmage's gift was enchanted so she might summon his help if the corsairs ever reappeared.

She would use it to speak to him, if the parliament denied Corrain's claim. Let the Archmage use his influence to change their mind, or the coin that he seemed to be able to summon out of thin air. Whatever it took, Zurenne didn't care.

Otherwise she would tell the world that Master Minelas, that charming man who had so convincingly sworn that the lamented Baron Halferan had appointed him to care for his widow and orphaned daughters—

Zurenne would tell the world that the scoundrel had been a renegade mage. That the wizard isle of Hadrumal's so-called Council had never so much as suspected his vicious nature, much less acted to curb it.

Once they had learned of his villainy, they had only sought to conceal it. If Corrain hadn't returned, ready and willing to bear witness to the wizard-isle's disgrace, Planir need never have admitted to Minelas's crimes. He had made no effort to find those Halferan men enslaved in the Archipelago, even after he had learned the renegade has sold them to the corsairs.

In the dark silence of the night, Zurenne wondered if the magewoman Jilseth hadn't been trapped alongside them when the corsairs had besieged Halferan, would the Archmage have let Zurenne die with her children; the last witnesses able to denounce Minelas for the villain he was?

Though of course the Archmage had told her no one would believe her, when Zurenne had threatened to tell before. But if he didn't want her to keep his secret, why had he handed over so much gold and silver, supposedly making good on Minelas's thefts? Zurenne knew that coin was the price of her silence without any wizard having to say so.

She sighed. Demanding the Archmage's help, if Corrain's claim was dismissed, assumed that Planir could find some way to defend Halferan from the parliament's decree. Zurenne suspected that saving them all from slaughter by corsairs had been simple by comparison.

She realised her restless feet had brought her to the sitting room's heavy oak table, long enough to seat five men on each side. It had been pushed back against the wall opposite the hearth, sturdy benches tucked beneath it.

Now it held stacks of leather-bound ledgers and bundles of the rent rolls that had preceded them; record of the barony's dues collected at solstice and equinox. Singed and scattered remnants of folded parchments were heaped haphazard beside them. All that Master Rauffe had salvaged from the muniment room as they fled the corsairs. Along with the shrine ledgers, this was all that remained of the archive relating the barony's pact with generations of tenantry.

Zurenne had no notion what to do with them. Her husband always dealt with such matters. Besides, there was no point her starting such an undertaking. Once Corrain was confirmed as Baron Halferan that would be one of his many challenges.

Though of course, she could address her own correspondence. Zurenne contemplated her prized writing box holding pens, ink and paper, the two halves cunningly hinged to open into a leather-faced slope. She should already have written the greetings customary at the turn of each season, sharing the latest news of her children and the household with her sisters and the neighbouring barony's ladies.

Several of their letters had arrived in the past day or so. They lay on the top of the writing box, their wax seals uncracked. Zurenne didn't want to read her sisters' protestations of affections or their excuses as they sought to explain why it had taken them so long, even after all her letters had stopped, to persuade their husbands that something was amiss in

Halferan.

She didn't want to read Lady Diress of Karpis's warm and friendly advice that Zurenne should yield to the inevitable and surrender voluntarily to Baron Karpis's protection. Since the parliament would undoubtedly agree it would be wholly irresponsible to abandon the lamented Baron Halferan's tenantry, his helpless widow and her innocent daughters to some trooper more used to taking orders than to giving them.

No. Zurenne would write once she knew which way the parliament's scales had tilted. Or perhaps she should say; which way those runes had rolled.

Her hand strayed to her pendant again. As well as using the three-sided bones for gambling as the household troopers did, some of the old women used them for telling fortunes. Roll them and one rune would be hidden on the bottommost face. On the two facets that showed, one rune would be upright and the other one reversed.

Were all her hopes to be overthrown by the parliament's barons, as easily as some bone cast from a gambler's hand landing wrong sides up?

The door from the entrance hall opened, unheralded by any tap. Ilysh stormed into the room.

'Lysha.' Zurenne immediately sat down on the end of a bench and reached for those unwanted letters. 'Kindly do me the courtesy of knocking.'

'Mama, the dress-lengths have arrived from Claithe.' The set of Ilysh's jaw ominously strengthened her resemblance to her dead father. 'Evrel says that the silks are for you and the broadcloths are for me and Neeny.'

'That's correct.' Zurenne snapped a wax roundel with the Fandail seal. Would news from her remote sister Celle offer some distraction?

'I want a silk gown.' Ilysh took a step to demand her mother's attention. 'I am Lady Halferan. You cannot dress me like a child!'

'I will dress you as I see fit.' Zurenne tossed the still-folded letter aside with sudden concern. 'Where is Neeny?'

Why wasn't her younger daughter's outrage echoing around the building if Lysha had given her the slip?

'In the kitchen.' Ilysh brushed her long brown hair back with something perilously close to a shrug.

Zurenne slammed her hand on the table. 'You are supposed to be looking after her!'

'I am not a nursemaid,' Lysha retorted hotly.

'No,' Zurenne snapped. 'Your nursemaid Jora has leave to visit her brothers and sisters as they mourn their murdered parents. Had you forgotten that? If you wish to be honoured as Lady of Halferan—' she was on her feet before she realised it. '— then take some measure of responsibility!'

Ilysh stared at her, fury kindling in her hazel eyes. Then she flushed scarlet and burst into tears.

Before Zurenne could take back her words, the girl fled for the master bedchamber opening off the sitting room, which the three of them were sharing amid a similar mismatch of old and new furnishings and truckle beds.

Despite the weight of the heavy oak door, Lysha managed to give it a creditable slam.

Zurenne sank back onto the bench. It wasn't as if she wanted silk dresses. Silk came from the Aldabreshin Archipelago where the corsairs lurked, when they weren't raiding the Caladhrian coast, robbing, burning and murdering innocents. But she had to keep up appearances and such opulence spoke of a safe and secure barony, to her own people as well as to those neighbours watching for any sign of weakness.

Her head ached, this time with anger. The parliament's barons knew that the Archipelago sheltered those accursed corsairs. Yet they eagerly purchased Aldabreshin

glassware, silks and spices, brought from Relshaz's merchants. The trading city on the muddy delta of the River Rel had grown rich on its inhabitants' willingness to buy and sell anything from anyone, up to and including trading slaves with the Aldabreshi warlords.

Thanks to the corsairs, some of those slaves were Caladhrian. Corrain could swear to that. Of all those Halferan men captured when Zurenne's husband was killed, he had managed to escape after a year or more in chains. What would the inland barons say to that? How could they deny they had any duty to act? That the corsairs' raids were the coastal lords' problem and none of theirs?

How long would they have to wait for news? Jilseth looked at the four-sided timepiece on the lofty mantel shelf. It had been turned promptly to its autumn face that very morning, now showing the day and night divided by ten equally spaced chimes instead of summer's longer hours or the far shorter divisions of winter daylight.

It was going to be a painfully long time before that arrow sliding down the long timescale prompted the next silvery chime or the one after that.

A knock sounded and the door to the hall opened to reveal Raselle. 'My lady—'

'Where is Esnina?' Zurenne strove not to vent her anger on her faithful personal maid.

'In the kitchen.' Raselle sank into a deep curtsy, her round face anxious. 'Helping Doratine make curd tarts. She was crying so—'

'Very well.' Zurenne could hear Lysha sobbing in the bed chamber. She couldn't face the thought of dealing with one of Neeny's exhausting tantrums as well.

Far better that the child found some amusement in the kitchen under Doratine's watchful, loving care. Far better than shrieking incomprehensible defiance at her mother until she fell asleep, only to wake and stare hollow-eyed at some recollection of the horrors she'd seen. Men hacking each other to pieces. Greybeards, women and children cut down amid bloody frenzy.

Would either of her daughters be happier when at least some of their current uncertainty was relieved? Zurenne so desperately hoped so.

She drew a deep breath. 'I must attend to my correspondence. Please bring me a tisane tray.'

'My lady.' Raselle retreated obediently from the room.

Zurenne meant to reach for a letter but once again she found her hand closing around the silver sigil on its ribbon.

If she could use the ensorcelled trinket to call on the Archmage, could she ask him to use his wizardry to at least find out what the parliament's barons were saying?

To ask, she thought with sudden guilt, how the lady wizard Jilseth fared? Because none of them would still be alive if the magewoman hadn't saved them and at such cost to herself.

That was something for Zurenne to remember, if she was ever tempted to give in to her miseries.