

THE WARRIOR'S BOND
The Fourth Tale of Einarinn
Juliet E McKenna



Chapter One

The Sieur's Frontispiece to the D'Olbriot Chronicle
As Written by Messire Guliel in His Own Hand
at this Winter Solstice,
Concluding the Second Year of Tadriol the Provident

There are years when I swear it takes me as long to compose this short summary of notable events, as it does for all the clerks and archivists, the stewards and chamberlains to abridge their ledgers and records for the posterity of the House. There have been times when I wonder if any Sieur in later generations will even read my carefully chosen words detailing important alliances, significant births or sorely mourned deaths. This year and last, my fear is that some future guardian of D'Olbriot's interests will treat my record with the same amused condescension I have been wont to feel when reading the more fanciful entries made by my forebears.

But as a rational man, I must accept I can do nothing to counter whatever beliefs or prejudices might influence subsequent readers of this annal. By that same token, I can only relate the startling dealings of this past year and ask that my words be accepted as the unvarnished truth, on my oath as Sieur of this House.

The first year of our new Emperor's reign concluded with the discovery of islands far in the eastern ocean, inhabited by a race of men hostile to Tormalin and backed by inimical magic entirely unlike conventional wizardry. These men of the Ice Islands or in their own tongue, Elietimm, were pursuing some arcane purpose of their own which led them to attack vulnerable members of this and other Names, robbing them of heirloom jewels and artefacts. As this year opened, I was persuaded by Planir, Archmage of Hadrumal, to assist his search for answers to this puzzle by granting him the service of Ryshad Tathel, sworn to this House for ten years and more. Ryshad had already done much to track these villains to their remote lair, as he sought justice in my Name for a victim from our House. I also acceded to the wizard's suggestion that I reward Ryshad with an ancient sword the Archmage had recently returned to me.

Believe me as I declare here and for perpetuity, that I had no notion what this seemingly innocent gesture might demand of Ryshad. But as my honour binds me, I confess I might have yet done the same, even had I known what would befall him. My duty as Sieur of this House demands I must look to the wider interests of all, even at severest cost to any one individual.

These Elietimm pursued Ryshad and the wizards he had been sent to protect, seeking the sword I had given and other artefacts held by the mages. By some foul connivance, the Elietimm encompassed Ryshad's enslavement by the Aldabreshin and it was only by virtue of his resourcefulness and courage that the man escaped alive and whole from the savagery of those southern islands. His first safe landfall beyond the Archipelago was regrettably the island of Hadrumal. There, Planir determined the sword Ryshad carried held vital knowledge,

locked within it by archaic enchantments. I do not pretend to understand by what means but the Archmage had learned that this blade and other treasures sought by the brutal Elietimm had come from that supposedly rich and fertile colony founded by Tormalin nobles in the final years of Nemith the Last, and lost thereafter in the mists of the Chaos that toppled the Old Empire.

Thus far I can picture your astonishment, unknown reader, but hereafter, I am concerned lest you dismiss my words as incredible. Do not; I charge you by whatever beliefs you hold dear. There will be other records to attest to this, as I have declared all that follows before the Convocation of Princes in my capacity as Adjurist.

The information Archmage Planir retrieved by his magics led him and mercenaries backed by D'Olbriot gold, carried on D'Olbriot ships, to the far side of the ocean where they found the long buried ruins of that lost colony. More astonishing yet, they discovered nigh on a thousand of those who had crossed the ocean in the distant past still living, if it could be called living, held in ensorcelled sleep through all the generations that had intervened. Enchantment was finally used in service of Tormalin blood to revive these unfortunates.

It is now clear that the Elietimm had been seeking these hidden sleepers intent on their utter destruction, determined to claim this vast, unfettered land. Seeing by whatever arcane means they had been outflanked, the Elietimm attacked and Ryshad Tathel again distinguished himself as the first assault was successfully driven off. Wizardly magic was also vital in countering fell Elietimm enchantments, so, of necessity, I continue my association with Planir. This will entitle me to call on his assistance, should any Elietimm magic be used against Tormalin. I am also taking steps to have every ancient record and archive of the House and the shrines under our protection searched for lore that might explain the mysteries of Artifice. Knowledge of such enchantments could yet prove critical in some as yet unforeseen struggle. When all else fails, one must fight fire with fire.

At this close of the year, I am relieved beyond measure to state we have seen no more ships come out of the north to harry coasts on either side of the ocean. The sole surviving noble patron of the original colony is Temar, Esquire D'Alsennin and accordingly, we are working closely with him. The colonists are even now attempting to rebuild their livelihoods and as soon as the Spring Equinox brings surcease from winter's storms, we will send them all the assistance D'Olbriot can offer. However, it remains to be seen how close our two realms can grow, given these ancients are still so dependent on religious beliefs that we in this present generation have long since discarded as superstition. I foresee it will fall to D'Olbriot to guide these innocents to a more rational understanding of the world and their place within it.



The Shrine of Ostrin, Bremilayne
9th of For-Summer in the Third Year of Tadriol the Provident, Afternoon

‘It’s raining darning needles out there.’ That’s what we say in Zyoutessela, when a summer storm brings fine, piercing rain sweeping in from the ocean. Drizzle content to hang as mist on more sheltered shores is whipped by merciless winds to sting skin and soak clothing, leaving a lingering chill long after the sun has returned. Not that I had any concerns, watching the weather’s vagaries from a comfortable lodging, high on a hill above the bustle of the harbour.

‘Do you get storms like these in Hadrumal, Casuel? You must face heavy weather off the Soluran Sea.’

My companion acknowledged my remarks with a sour grunt as he snapped fingers at a candle stand. The wicks flared with surprise at being called into service but the louring skies made the room too dim for reading. Today Casuel was fretting over his almanac, a tide table and a recently acquired set of maps. I suppose it made a change from the ancient tomes he’d been scouring for the last two seasons, hunting hints of lost lore from one end of Toremal to the other, garnering clues that might unravel the mysteries of the past. I admired his scholarship but in his place, I’d have taken these few days to draw breath, waiting to see if those on the ship we so eagerly anticipated could supply some answers.

There was a rattle behind me. I turned to see Casuel had pushed aside my game board. The trees of the Forest had toppled over to knock into apples thrushes and pied crows, sending the little wooden birds skittering over the scarred wooden surface. I held my peace; I didn’t particularly want to finish the game and Casuel wasn’t going to learn anything from another defeat to add to the three he’d already suffered. The wizard might be learned in his abstract arts but he was never going to win a game of Raven till he overcame the spinelessness that inevitably hamstrung his hopelessly convoluted plans.

I squinted into the gloom, trying to distinguish between ripples in the glass and the torrents of rain blurring the vista. Black squalls striped the swags of grey cloud, dragging curtains of rain across the white-capped, grey-green swells. ‘Is that a sail?’

Casuel shot an accusing look at the timepiece on the mantelshelf. ‘I hardly think so. It’s barely past the sixth hour and we don’t expect them before the evening tide.’

I shrugged. ‘I don’t suppose they expected Dastennin would send a storm to push them on.’ That darker shape in the turmoil of the water was too regular to be shadow or swell. That fluttering white was too constant to be wind-driven spume. Was it the ship we’d spent two days of idle comfort awaiting? I took up the spyglass I’d bought that morning, one of the finest instruments the skilled seafarers of the eastern shore could supply. Opening the upper light of the window, I steadied the leather bound cylinder on the sill, ignoring the flutter of paper riffled by an opportunist gust darting inside.

‘Saedrin’s stones, Ryshad!’ Casuel slapped at uncooperative documents, cursing as his candles were snuffed.

I ignored him, sweeping the brass circle over the roiling surface of the sea. Where was that fugitive shape? I checked back with my naked eye – there, I had it! Not a coaster; an ocean ship, with steep sides, three masts and deck castles fore and aft.

‘Are there any ships due in from the south?’ I asked Casuel, minutely adjusting my glass

to keep the tiny image in view.

Pages rustled behind me. ‘No, nothing expected from Zyoutessela or Kalaven until the middle of the season.’

‘That’s according to your lists?’ I didn’t share Casuel’s faith in inked columns of names and dates. My father may be a mason but I’d known plenty of sailors growing up in Zyoutessela, isthmus city uniquely favoured by Dastennin with ports to both east and west. This could well be some ship whose captain had risked a profitable if unscheduled voyage. I find seafarers a curious mix of the bold and the cautious, men who plan obsessively for every eventuality they might face once out of reach of harbour but who throw caution to the winds to seize some unforeseen opportunity winging past.

Casuel came to stand at my shoulder, a sheaf of documents in his hand. ‘It could be from Inglis.’

The metal ring cold in my eye stopped me from shaking my head. ‘I don’t think so, not coming in on that course.’ I leaned forward in a futile effort to see some identifying flag.

‘What is it?’ Casuel demanded.

I was hissing through my teeth as my concern for the vessel grew. ‘I think they’re carrying too much sail.’ The masts were trimmed with the barest reef of white but even that was enough to let the winds make a plaything of the ship. I looked up from the spyglass and out at the ocean. The captain’s choices were going from bad to worse. A run for the sheltering embrace of the massive harbour wall would mean letting the storm batter broad on the beam, with seas heavy enough to sink the ship. Turning the prow into the weather risked being driven clear away from the safe anchorage. Taking his chances on the open ocean might save the ship but the captain had wind and tide against him and the Lord of the Sea hones this ocean coast to a razor’s edge with the scour of wind and water. I could see the unforgiving reefs tearing the rolling waves into fraying skeins of foam beyond the sea wall. ‘Dastennin grant them grace,’ I murmured.

Casuel raised himself on tiptoe to look out of the window where my few fingers of extra height saved me the effort. A spatter of rain made him duck and look through the lower pane, brushing wavy brown hair out of his dark eyes. I wiped drops from the end of the spyglass and took a moment to study the sky. Slate coloured storm clouds threw down rain to batter the bruised seas, crushing the crests of the waves into flat smears of spume. I savoured the sharp salt freshness carried on the wind but then I was safe ashore.

The bowsprit dipped deep into a mountainous sea, wrenching itself free a breath later but the whole ship seemed to shudder, embattled decks awash. Imagination supplied the cries of the panicked passengers inside my head, curses from hard -pressed crew, the groan of straining timber, the insidious sound of water penetrating stressed seams. Pale canvas went soaring away from the masts like fleeing seabirds. The captain had opted to cut loose his sails but the ocean was fighting him on every side now, contrary wind and current confusing rudder and keel.

‘Are they going to sink?’ the wizard asked in a hesitant voice.

‘I don’t know.’ My knuckles white were white on the spyglass, frustration hollow in my gut. ‘You said there’d be a mage on board. Can’t you bespeak him, work with him somehow?’

‘Even assuming this is the colonists’ ship, my talents are based in the element of Earth,’ said Casuel with habitual pomposity. ‘At this distance, my chances of influencing the combined power of air and water that such a storm would generate-’ His voice tailed off with honest regret.

The storm-tossed ship slid across my field of view and I cursed as it escaped me. Looking up, I exclaimed with inarticulate surprise. ‘There’s another one.’

Casuel scrubbed crossly at glass fogged by his breath. ‘Where?’

‘Take a line from the roof of the fish market and out past the end of the harbour wall.’ I turned my glass on the newcomer and frowned. ‘They’re rigged for fair weather.’

‘They can’t be,’ said Casuel with arbitrary authority.

‘I’m the one with the spyglass, Casuel.’ I forced myself to keep my tone mild. Irritating he might be but I had to work with the wizard and that meant civilized manners from me, even if Casuel couldn’t manage common courtesy.

Time enough for idle thoughts later. I focused on the second boat, a round-bellied coastal craft with triangular sails plump and complacent when it should have been fighting for its life in those surging seas. Heedless of raging swells fighting to ram it onto the rocks, it was sweeping serenely towards the harbour.

‘Oh.’ Casuel’s tone was heavy with displeasure.

‘Magic?’ I hardly needed mystical communion with the elements to realise that, when I could see the ship defying all sense and logic.

‘An advanced practitioner,’ Casuel confirmed with glum envy.

I looked for some telltale of magic, a crackle of blue light or a ball of unearthly radiance clinging to the masthead. Deep-water sailors talk of such things, calling it the Eye of Dastennin. There was nothing to see; perhaps this unknown wizard considered it enough to set the ship riding high in the water, untouched by the storm.

I looked back abruptly to the first vessel, now heeling dangerously. It had moved a full length or more closer to the seething rocks, its plight ever more perilous. As we watched, helpless, a great wave plunged over the deck, the waist of the ship vanishing completely, deck castles alone resisting the insatiable seas. We held ourselves motionless until the ship struggled up to ride the surface once more. But now it had a dangerous list; cargo must have shifted in the hold and that had been the death of many a crew.

‘They’re going to help.’

The breath came easier in my chest as I realised Casuel was right. The little coastal vessel veered toward the reefs.

‘Dast’s teeth!’ I took an involuntary step backwards as lightning split the darkness like a rip in the very fabric of the sky. A shimmering spear lanced down to the mast of the struggling vessel and I expected to see the burning blue-white light set ropes and spars ablaze. But the incandescent arc floated free from the clouds, reaching over to the bobbing coast boat and fastening itself to the stern. The ocean ship was pulled up short with a visible jerk, prow wheeling round like some toy tugged by exuberant hands. For an instant it seemed storm and sea froze in mutual amazement. I watched with equal astonishment. The ocean ship should have been pulling the coast boat in to share its doom on the saw-edged reefs but the magic was proof against the pull of the bigger vessel. The little vessel barely slowed its pace towards the harbour, triangular sails full bellied and ignoring winds that should have ripped them to rags.

Casuel made a sudden grab for my spyglass, making me bring it up so fast I nearly blacked my own eye. In the brass circle, I saw figures emerge onto the sodden decks of the ocean ship, even at this distance their gestures eloquent of bewilderment and relief. A flash of green and gold defied the all-encompassing grey of the storm as a pennon was run up the foremast. The lynx’s mask was no more than a yellow blur above the chevron but the ancient pattern of the D’Olbriot insignia was plain enough to me.

I slapped Casuel on the shoulder. ‘It’s them! Let’s get down to the dock.’ Rival emotions jostled my thoughts. Relief for the sake of all on board barely masked hollow realisation that all Messire’s current ambitions had nearly been sunk along with the vessel. Then I would have lost all, committed to the Sieur’s service for no hope of the reward that had persuaded me to renew my oath to the House. Elation crowded out such pointless worry. The ship and its precious passengers were here. Now I could promote my patron’s interests in good

conscience, while also settling those obligations that touched my honour. Once such debts were settled on either hand, I could hope for future independence with Livak at my side. Exhilaration carried me as far as the door before I realised Casuel was still standing at the window, arms crossed over his narrow chest and with a scowl so black it threatened to tangle his brows in his hair.

‘Come on,’ I urged. ‘They may need help.’

Casuel sniffed. ‘Any mage who can wield that kind of power is going to have little use for my assistance.’

There’s a widely held belief in Tormalin, that wizards are so air-headed, they’re no earthly use. Casuel confirmed this more thoroughly than any other mage I’d met. Before Messire’s command and Dastennin’s whim had tangled me up in these arcane complexities, I’d had no cause to meet mages. Like most folk, I vaguely assumed studying the mysteries of magebirth conferred wisdom, as always seemed the case in ancient tales. In reality, I’d not met anyone quite so small-minded as Casuel since the dame school where I learned my letters. Always fretting over what other people might think of him, suspicious that he was never given his due, he was a tangled mess of petty ambition. I’d been born to a family of no-nonsense craftsmen, and had chosen a life among soldiers in service to a noble House so I’m used to men straightforward to the point of bluntness and confident in acknowledged skills. Casuel tested my patience sorely.

But he’s a dedicated scholar, I reminded myself, a talent you can’t claim. Just as important, he’s Tormalin born and bred, so knew and respected the ranks and customs of our country which undoubtedly made him the most fitting wizard to act as link between Hadrumal and Toremal. It was just a shame he wasn’t easier to work with.

‘We’re here to greet the Kellarin colonists on behalf of the Sieur and the Archmage, aren’t we?’ I held the door open. These past few seasons shepherding Casuel around the byways and bridleways of Tormalin in search of ancient tomes buried in ancestral libraries had taught me arguing simply set the wizard digging in his expensive boot heels. Calm assumption of his cooperation soon had him picking up his cloak, grumbling under his breath as he followed me.

I drew my own cape close as we stepped out of the superior guesthouse into the extensive grounds of Ostrin’s shrine. The flighty wind snatched at my hood and I let it fall back rather than struggle to keep my head dry as Casuel was doing. The porter at the main gate opened the postern for us with a friendly smile to lighten his grimace as he left his sheltered niche. The wind slammed the heavy oak behind us.

Catching Casuel by the arm, I pulled him out of the path of a sled skittering down the hill on gleaming metal runners. We placed our feet on the slick blue cobbles with care but locals ran down the notoriously steep streets of Bremilayne with the practised abandon of goats from the mountains rising up behind the city. Rain poured from the slate-hung eaves of houses stepped on foundations obstinately defying the slope, the door of one often nigh on a level with the upper windows of its neighbour. The wider spaced houses of the upper town gave way to cramped and dirty lanes by the time we emerged onto the broad sweep of the quayside, a crowd was assembling, drawn from unsavoury harbour taverns. Dockers were eager to earn their ale money unloading the new arrivals, hawkers and whores just keen to take any advantage. I forced a way through those just avid for spectacle and Casuel scurried close behind me.

‘I’ve never seen the like, not magic used like that.’ One man spoke across me, awe mixed with uncertainty.

‘And won’t do again, I’d say,’ agreed his friend, sounding relieved.

‘I’ll grant it was novelty enough but if they’d gone down, we’d have had some wreck-sale,’ A third was looking with greedy eyes at the tilted masts of the ocean ship. ‘Think of the

salvage would have washed ashore.'

I elbowed the would-be scavenger gull aside. With the list on the ship still severe, the crew and dockers were fighting to secure sodden ropes running slick and uncooperative round battered bollards. I wrenched on my own gloves and added my weight to steady a hawser that two men were struggling to make safe. 'Casuel! Lend a hand, man!'

The double-headed bollards lining the quayside suddenly glowed and amber light crackled in the air, startling profanity from the man beside me. I clutched the cable in surprise myself; I hadn't intended he use magic. Immobile metal twisted and ducked beneath the ropes, black iron arms questing blindly then looping themselves round the straining hemp before drawing back to stand upright once more. Reeled in like a gaffed fish, the great ship lurched, rolling upright to smack hard into the side of the dock with a crash that reverberated round the harbour. The vessel shivered from bow to stern with an ominous sound of splintering.

'Nice work, Cas!' I dropped the rope and hurried along the quay, scanning the crowded deck. 'Temar!' A sparely built young man by the stern castle looked round at my hail, acknowledging me with a brief wave ' We need to get your people off, quick as you can.' The ship hung low and unbalanced in the water and the damage Casuel had just done might finish what the storm had started. Cargo could be recovered from the bottom of the harbour but I didn't want to be dragging the dock for bodies.

A gangplank was hastily thrown out from the ship's rail but a flare of golden radiance sent the dockers reaching for it recoiling in surprise. I turned to see Casuel gesturing at the hovering wood, face pinched with pique. A path instantly cleared between the mage and the ship and the crowd around Casuel thinned noticeably.

Temar ignored the last remnants of magelight fading from the gangplank as he hurried down to me. 'Ryshad

'I thought we were going to be fishing you out of the rock pools.' I gripped his forearm in the archaic clasp he offered, noting that his fingers were no longer the smooth white of the idle noble but almost as weathered and calloused as my own.

His grip on my own arm tightened involuntarily and I felt the pressure of muscles hardened by work. 'When that last wave hit, I did wonder if we would surface on some shore of the Otherworld. Dastennin be thanked we made landfall safely.' The accents of ancient Tormalin were still strong in Temar's voice but I heard more modern intonations as well, mostly Lescari. I looked up to the ship to recognise various mercenaries who'd chosen to stay on the far side of the ocean after the previous year's expedition had discovered the long lost colony of the Old Empire. They were getting the people off the vessel as fast as they could.

'Dastennin?' Casuel came up, frowning as he struggled to understand Temar. 'Tell him he has modern magecraft to thank rather than ancient superstition.' Casuel had been born to a Tormalin merchant family and this wasn't the first time I'd heard echoes of his Rationalist upbringing. It must cause him some confusion, I thought with amusement, since that philosophy denounces elemental magic just as readily as it reviles religion.

'Casuel Devoir, Temar D'Alsennin,' I made a belated introduction hastily.

'Esquire.' Casuel swept a bow worthy of an Emperor's salon. 'Your captain was relying on his own seafaring skills? I thought it was clearly understood an ocean crossing can only be safely managed with magical assistance.'

'Quite so.' Temar bowed in turn with a deference to the wizard nicely combined with hauteur. 'And one of your colleagues was performing admirably until he took a fall that broke both his legs.' Fleeting disdain in Temar's ice blue eyes gave the lie to the measured politeness of his words. He indicated a figure being carried down the gangplank by two burly sailors, injuries solidly splinted with spars and canvas.

'I'm sorry?' Casuel spared his injured colleague a scant glance. 'Please speak more slowly.'

I decided to turn the conversation to less contentious matters. ‘When did you cut your hair?’

Temar ran a hand over the short crop that replaced the long queue I’d last seen him with, hair as black as my own but straight as a well rope. ‘Practicality is now the watchword of Kel Ar’Ayen. Fashion is a luxury we cannot yet afford.’ I was glad to see a smile of good-humoured self-mockery lightened the severity of his angular features.

‘We’d better get this lot under lock and key, Temar, over yonder.’ I pointed to the warehouse I’d bespoken when we first arrived in Bremilayne. Sodden sacks and battered casks were being swung onto the dock in capacious slings, stacked anyhow as everyone hurried to lighten the stricken vessel. I caught an avid expression on more than one on-looker’s face.

‘I will direct the men aboard ship.’ Temar returned to the gangplank without further ado.

‘I’d better see to whoever that mage is,’ Casuel said hastily as he watched the injured man being lifted onto a litter.

‘Absolutely.’ Casuel could deal with wizardly concerns and I’d see to my own responsibilities. Seeing D’Olbriot insignia on the cloak of a thickset new arrival by the lofty warehouse, I hurried over and ushered the man inside the shelter of the echoing building, speaking without preamble.

‘This arrival’s going to be the talk to the taverns, so who do we have to secure the place if the wharf rats come sniffing around?’ I ran fingers through my hair to shed the worst of the rain; damp curls clinging tight to my fingers.

‘I’ve a double handful of newly-recognised and four sworn and loyal.’ The man’s grizzled and wiry hair ran unbroken into a full beard framing a prominent nose and bulbous eyes, leaving him looking like an owl peering out of an ivy bush. ‘Sorry we’re so behind hand. We’d have been here day before yesterday if a horse hadn’t gone lame.’

‘It’s Glannar, isn’t it, from the Layne valley holdings?’ His rich, rolling voice helped me place him, sergeant-at-arms to those most isolated holdings of the House of D’Olbriot.

The man’s face creased into a ready grin. ‘You’ve the advantage of me. I recall you came up when we had that trouble in the shearing sheds but I can’t put a name to you.’

‘Ryshad.’ I returned his smile. ‘Ryshad Tathel.’

‘Done well by the House, I hear,’ Glannar observed, with a glance at the shiny copper circling my upper arm. He spoke with the self-assurance of a man who’d earned Chosen status long enough since to let his own arm ring grow dull with the years.

‘No more than staying true to my oath.’ I kept my tone easy. Glannar was only making conversation, not fishing for secrets or better yet salacious detail like some I’d met since half-truths about my adventures in the Archipelago had escaped Messire’s orders for discretion. ‘You’ve got your lads well drilled?’ I’d spent my share of time training raw recruits with wits blunter than a plough handle.

Glannar nodded. ‘They’re lead miners’ sons, all bar one, so won’t stand any nonsense. We’ll keep this lot safe as a mouse in a malt heap.’

‘Good.’ I turned my head as the great doors swung open to let a row of wet and laden dockers enter. I curbed an impulse to shed my cloak and make myself useful; getting my hands dirty wouldn’t have been appropriate to my shiny new rank or to Glannar’s consequence as sergeant-at-arms hereabouts. So I watched as he sent the sworn men about their business with brisk gestures. They in turn were visibly diligent in organising the recognised men, lads newly come to the service of the House, on the lowest rung of the ladder, and keen to prove themselves worthy of invitation to swear the oath binding them to D’Olbriot interests. I

watched the well-muscled youths set to with a will. I’d sworn that same ancient oath with fervent loyalty and believed in it with all my heart, until the events of the last year and a half

had shaken my faith to its roots. I had come within a whisker of handing back my oath fee and abandoning my allegiance to the Name, believing the House had abandoned me. Then reward had been offered, the rank of Chosen man as recompense for my anguish, and I had taken it, more than a little uncertain but not sure enough of my other choices to abandon what I'd known for so long. But I had taken other obligations on myself as well, where once my oath had left no room for other loyalties

Glannar's genial commands rang to the rafters behind me as I went out. The rain was slackening but the sky stayed grey and sullen. About as sullen as Casuel who was standing in the meagre shelter of the dockside hoist being addressed by a tall figure wrapped in a bright blue cloak. I let a burdened sled scrape past over the cobbles before making my way over.

'Ryshad Tathel, this is Velindre Ychane, mage of Hadrumal.' Casuel looked as if he were sucking a lemon. 'Her affinity is with the air, as you've no doubt guessed. It was her on the other ship.'

'My lady.' I bowed low. 'We are deep in your debt.' I doubted Casuel had shown any gratitude but the House of D'Olbriot owed this woman a full measure of thanks and for good or ill, I was its representative here.

'It's lucky you were there,' chipped in Casuel.

'Luck had nothing to do with it.' She made a plain statement of fact out of words that could so easily have been arrogance, rebuke or both. 'I've been making a study of the air currents off the Cape of Winds this past half-year. When I heard Esquire D'Alsennin would arrive around the middle of the season, I decided to work our way up the coast. I scried his ship as well as the likely impact of the storm and thought it best that we make landfall together. Given Urlan's accident, it's as well we did.' She addressed me directly, leaving Casuel tugging impatiently at the ties of his cloak. Her voice was low and a little husky, as self-assured as her stance. For all her Mandarkin name, the regular accents of Hadrumal were unshaded by any older allegiance and I guessed she had been born on that distant, secretive island.

'You want to meet Temar? Esquire D'Alsennin, that is?' This was setting a new piece on a game board already well into play. I'd want to know more about this unknown lady before letting her loose among the complex concerns of the colony and the House I served, whatever Casuel might have to say about the unquestioning cooperation a mage was entitled to as of right.

'When he has leisure from more pressing matters.' Velindre's smile lent a sudden feminine air to her almost mannish features. She would never be considered a beautiful woman but her striking appearance would halt any eye and that impact would outlast more conventional charms. A few wisps of fine blonde hair escaped the confines of her hood and she brushed them away from pale lashed hazel eyes. 'So you are Ryshad,' she mused. 'I've heard a lot about you.'

I decided to match her directness. 'From whom?'

'Initially, from Otrick.' As she spoke, sadness seemed darken the heavy storm clouds above us. 'Latterly from Troanna.'

'What has Troanna to do with your studies?' Casuel was fidgeting from one foot to another anxious lest someone else's manoeuvrings escape him.

'She's been keeping me supplied with all the news from home, Cas,' answered Velindre easily 'Shall I tell her you were asking after her?'

Casuel blinked, caught off balance. I've yet to fully understand the formal and informal ranks and authorities of the wizards of Hadrumal, the ill-defined and often overlapping functions their Council and their Halls, but I knew enough to know Casuel wouldn't want the acerbic wit of Troanna, acknowledged as pre-eminent in water magic, sharpened up at his expense. If Cloud Master and Flood Mistress kept her informed, Velindre had powerful

friends.

‘How might Esquire D’Alsennin be of assistance?’ I asked politely.

Velindre smiled again. ‘He’s crossed the ocean and sailed unknown shores with currents and winds that no mage has ever sensed. No wizard ever passes up the chance of new knowledge.’

Which was certainly true but if that was the whole story, I was a Caladhrian pack mule.

‘I’ll see if we can accommodate you,’ said Casuel with fussy self-importance.

Velindre’s eyes hardened and I thought for a moment she was about to challenge his pretensions but a new arrival spared him any rebuke.

‘Mage Devoir.’ The newcomer bobbed a nervous curtsy that edged the hem of her rose-pink dress with the muck of the dockside.

‘Allin?’ Casuel sounded both surprised and displeased.

‘You’re entitled to call him Casuel, just like anyone else,’ said Velindre dryly. ‘So how is Urlan?’

The girl Allin looked up, blushed and dropped her gaze to study her folded hands intently. ‘Both legs are broken and the bosun was saying he’d seen splinters of bone through the skin of his right shin. He’s been taken to the Infirmary at the Shrine.’ Where Velindre was scarcely shorter than me, Allin barely came up to Casuel’s shoulder. Even allowing for the heavy cape bunched round her, I guessed her figure would be as round as her plain snub-nosed face. But her boot-button eyes were bright with intelligence and good nature, attributes lacking in many a prettier girl.

‘Do you have lodgings arranged?’ I asked.

‘The man from the Shrine said we could probably stay there as well.’ The girl peeped up at me from beneath her dun-coloured fringe. Her Tormalin was fluent but of unmistakable Lescari origin.

‘If there’s any difficulty, refer it to me. We’re in the upper guest house,’ said Casuel officiously.

‘We’ll join you there for dinner.’ Velindre turned on her heel with a final smile and before Casuel could shut his protesting mouth, her long stride took her out of earshot.

‘So who’s she?’ I asked the wizard.

Outrage was slow to fade from his well-made features. ‘Velindre is a mage of some standing in Hadrumal but she’s always claimed to prefer focusing on her studies rather than engaging herself with the wider concerns of wizardry.’

I wondered just where the sneer in his tone was directed but decided his prejudices weren’t worth pursuing. ‘So she hasn’t been privy to any of Planir’s intrigues over the last year or so?’

Casuel bridled. ‘I hardly think intrigue is the right word for the necessary care Planir takes of Hadrumal’s interests.’

‘Could you bespeak the Archmage, please? To let him know she’s here and apparently interested in the colony.’ I made my request with a politeness calculated to soothe Casuel’s ruffled feathers.

‘I was intending to do so, naturally.’ Of course Casuel had been planning to tell Planir about Velindre; telling tales was another dame school habit I’d observed in the man over the past half-year. ‘I wonder if he knows Troanna’s been in touch with her.’

‘Shall we do it now? Planir might have an opinion on Velindre’s reasons for being here and he’ll certainly want to know what’s happened to Urlan.’ I wanted all my birds in a row before I encountered Velindre again and there was little enough for me to do here.

‘Yes, I should see what news the Archmage has for us, shouldn’t I? Let’s get out of this rain.’ Those notions sent the wizard scurrying eagerly up the hill, clutching the hood of his cloak tight beneath his handsome chin.

Once we were back in the guesthouse chamber he'd appropriated as a study, Casuel set about his wizardry. I'd seen him work various spells over the last season or so, and oddly, he was at his least objectionable when working magic. The wizard took a seat at the table, setting a steel mirror on the table with a candle before it, lighting the wick with a snap of his fingers and a flourish of the lace at his cuffs. He laid his hands flat on the chestnut wood, eyes fixed unblinking on the reflected flame of the candle

I sat in a corner, content to watch and listen; Casuel could do the talking. What I wanted was someone with the power to curb this Velindre alerted to her presence, just in case she had some private ambition that might threaten all I was working for. I had no reason to suspect her but then again, no reason to trust her. I didn't particularly trust Planir either, having suffered the charming ruthlessness of Hadrumal's Archmage on my own account, but I knew he would always defend his own interests and for the moment, those marched in step with mine and those of the House of D'Olbriot.

The candle flame burned yellow then darkened to a bloody orange, the colour tainting the reflection. Shimmering across the mirror, magic began to slowly revolve like water stirred with a rod. Where a hollow might have appeared in swirling liquid, a hole in the very fabric of the air spread across the metal surface, elements yielding to the arcane influence of the mageborn. Casuel was frowning, jaw set in utter concentration, the barest movement of light reflecting from a gold ring on one taut finger. Even after all the times I'd seen Casuel do this, I felt my spine tense at such an inexplicable manipulation of the natural order.

An image appeared in the mirror, magic reflecting the Archmage sat at a table in his study. I recognised it from my own unwilling visit to Hadrumal, a room of elegant furnishings and deadly purpose. Some instinct lifted his dark head and he looked directly across the countless leagues down through Casuel's spell, fine black brows lifted in surprise. 'Yes?'

'The colonists have arrived,' said Casuel, speaking rather rapidly. 'They had trouble making landfall because Urlan injured himself in a fall.'

'Badly? Planir leaned forward, face intent. 'Have you seen him?'

'Not yet, it's his legs you see, he's been taken to the Infirmary.' Casuel sounded like a slack apprentice trying to excuse himself to my father.

Small in the mirror, the Archmage's image nodded abruptly before gesturing in unmistakable dismissal. 'Go and see him for yourself and then bespeak me again at once.' My father had no time for underlings coming to him with tales of a task half done either.

Casuel cleared his throat. 'Velindre arrived in Bremilayne on the same tide. It seems she's eager to speak to D'Alsennin.'

'Is she?' Planir's tone was non-committal but even at this distance I could see his lean face was unsmiling.

Casuel was nonplussed. 'So what should I do? What should I say to her?'

Giving her some credit for saving the stricken ship would be a good start, I thought silently.

'You make the introductions she seeks.' Planir sounded faintly surprised that Casuel needed to ask. 'And you make note of her questions, whom she asks them of and the replies she receives. Then you tell me.'

Casuel preened himself visibly at the idea of being thus taken into the Archmage's confidence. It looked more like a fool's naivety being used against him to me as Planir's mouth curved like the merciless smile of a shark.

'Is she seeking some advancement?' persisted Casuel. 'She always says mastery of her element is more important than rank within the halls or recognition by the Council.' His bemusement was plain; that someone might disdain the status that he so ineffectually craved.

I heard Planir drum his fingers on the table in an uncharacteristic betrayal of tension. 'I've heard her name mentioned as a possible candidate for Cloud Mistress,' he said lightly. 'I'd be

interested if she were to say anything that suggests her own thoughts turn that way. Though you're not to raise the subject yourself, Casuel, understand?'

'But Otrick is Cloud Master,' frowned Casuel.

'Indeed,' Planir replied flatly. 'And will remain so, whatever Troanna might say.'

But that old wizard was locked in enchanted unconsciousness, laid low by aetheric malice along with so many others in the fight for Kellarin the summer before, souring the triumph I'd shared with Temar, the mercenaries backing him and the mages who'd paid them. Finding some means of restoring those unfortunates ranked high among the obligations prompting me to continued service to Messire D'Olbriot. Fortunately, a leading prince of the Empire, the Sieur was foremost among those backing the search for lore to counter Elietimm enchantments. That's why I had spent the first half of the year shepherding Casuel round distant dusty libraries while my beloved Livak had taken herself clear across the Old Empire on a quest for knowledge held by the ancient races of wood and mountain.

Planir's next words diverted me from wondering how she might be faring. 'Ryshad, good day to you.'

I couldn't prevent a faint start of surprise; I'd been thinking the spell wouldn't reach to my distant seat. 'Archmage.' I gave the amber tinted reflection a nod but didn't move closer.

'I heard from Usara a few days ago,' Planir continued in friendly fashion. 'Livak's keeping well. They're heading into the mountains to see Mountain sagas might teach us all.'

'Did they find anything of note in the Great Forest?' asked Casuel anxiously. He'd been voluble in his contempt for Livak's theory that archaic traditions could hold unknown wisdom, so any success on her part would make him look a mighty fool. Armed with a book of old songs she insisted held hints of lost enchantments, Livak had set off determined to prove him wrong.

'Nothing conclusive has come to light.' The Archmage raised his hand again and the glow in the mirror flared bright. 'If there's nothing else, I've much to attend to here, as you know.'

'Give Usara my regards the next time you bespeak him.' The shimmering void closed in on itself, leaving no more than an afterimage burned on the back of my eye. I blinked, not sure if Planir had heard me or not. Still, at least I knew Livak was in good health and I hugged that knowledge close. She was with Usara and I reminded myself that it wasn't magic I mistrusted, just certain mages. Usara was competent and honest and that weighed heavy in the scales against Planir's deviousness and Casuel's mean spirit.

'I'd better see how Urlan is.' Casuel was looking abstracted. 'Then I'd better review my notes, to get questions for D'Alsennin clear in my mind.' And to remind himself of those few fragments of possible knowledge he'd pieced together from scraps of unheeded parchment and books faded with age. He'd want something of his own to casually mention to Planir, to counter anything Livak might find in the Forest or the Mountains. She'd certainly crow loud and long over him if she returned successful, so I could hardly blame Casuel for that. I stifled my recurrent longing for her exuberant company by reminding myself I'd agreed to her trip, so I should hardly be complaining about her absence. And her quest was only one half of the two-handed plan we hoped would secure us a future together and Casuel wouldn't be the only one feeling the lash of her tongue, if Livak returned to find I'd failed to play my part. Smiling at that thought, I recovered my damp cloak from its hook. 'I'll go and see how they are getting on at the dock.'

Casuel was already deep in his books; so much for his concern for his fellow mage. I left him to it and went back down the hill to the harbour. Seeing Glannar's men at their ease in front of the barred warehouse door, I looked for Temar. He was standing amid burly dockers, counting out coin into the gang-leader's calloused palm.

'A fair rate for the day,' I observed, calculating the Tormalin crowns bright in the man's filthy hand. The docker grunted, non-committal.

‘But with the weather hardly fair, I think something over for the cold and the wet.’ Temar dropped a couple of silver marks onto the gold and a grudging smile lifted the docker’s lip to reveal stained brown teeth.

‘Pleasure to do business with you, Esquire,’ he nodded, before stowing the coin securely in a money belt and whistling up his crew with a gesture towards a nearby tavern.

‘You don’t want to get a reputation as an easy touch,’ I warned Temar.

He shrugged, unconcerned. ‘If the ships of Kel Ar’Ayen are known to pay well, we will never lack for labour to get them unloaded.’ He nodded towards the ship that had brought Velindre. ‘So who is this wizard that I owe my life? How does she arrive in so timely a fashion?’

‘Her name’s Velindre but that’s all I know of her,’ I admitted reluctantly. ‘She says she’s interested in the winds and currents of Kellarin’s coast but Planir thinks she may have ambitions to make a name for herself in Hadrimal.’

‘If she hopes for a salvage due, she had best get in line behind those others looking to make a claim on the colony,’ said Temar lightly.

I looked at him, assessing the hint of seriousness in his words. With an easy assumption of D’Olbriot authority over Kellarin running through the idle gossip of sworn and chosen over the last season, I’d been the only one suggesting the game might play out differently.

‘Temar!’ A thin woman came striding over the cobbles towards us, hood falling back from brown hair liberally streaked with grey and concern deepening the lines of age in her face. She was wiping her face in unthinking, repetitive gestures though the rain had all but ceased, speaking rapidly to Temar. Her speech was too thick with the intonation of Old Toremal for me but I recognised her as the Demoiselle Tor Arrial, one of Kellarin’s few other surviving nobility. Temar nodded and looked at me. ‘Avila wishes to know where we are to lodge. Most of the crew and other passengers are claiming rooms in these inns.’

‘We have everything you need made ready at the Shrine of Ostrin.’ I spoke slowly in my most formal accents. Avila Tor Arrial looked at me sharply, one chapped hand clutching a cloak pin set with rubies and pale rose diamonds at her throat. After a pause, she nodded and her gesture needed no translation so I led the way, leaving behind the ramshackle dockside for the more regular streets around the circle of Ostrin’s walls.

‘I thought there were supposed to be more of you,’ I remarked to Temar.

‘Only five by the time we were ready to sail.’ He shrugged. ‘When it came to it, they all found reasons to stay. The more we talk to the sailors, to the mages, the more we learn how our world has changed. At least in Kellarin we know what we are dealing with.’ He fell silent and we walked without speaking until we reached the embrace of Ostrin’s walls.

‘It’s this way.’ I waved Avila through the gate welcoming all comers into the stone circle. The broad gravel sweep inside was busy with new arrivals, two coaches unloading a vociferous family presumably taking ship to north or south.

‘Perhaps they were right to stay,’ murmured Temar, eyes wide as he looked back out of the gate at the thriving town. ‘It is all so different, nothing as I remember it.’

‘Let’s get you warm,’ I urged, seeing a pallor I didn’t like in his face.

He followed me without protest to the comfortable guesthouse behind the main shrine to Ostrin. Maidservants were busy about the hospitality that is ever the god’s chief concern, offering soft towels, ewers of warm water and hot tisanes to stiff and chilled arrivals, porters discreetly depositing battered luggage in bedchambers.

‘There are rooms reserved here for you and the Demoiselle Tor Arrial.’ I lead Temar up the broad stairway, wooden panelling gleaming with years of dedicated polish. ‘The sailors and mercenaries can shift for themselves in the inns but Messire thought you would welcome some privacy.’ The exaggerated tales of the mariners and freebooters could supply sufficient grist to satisfy the rumour mill, so there was no need to expose Temar to intrusive curiosity.

That thought sparked another as I opened the door to the room I'd chosen for Temar. 'The mage Velindre has invited herself to dine with me and Casuel this evening. Why don't you and Avila eat in the upper parlour?'

Temar halted on the threshold to gave me a narrow look before shrugging. 'As you see fit.'

'There's clean linen, shaving soap, razor.' I nodded at the washstand. 'I'm next door if you need anything else.' I hesitated, wondering whether to offer companionship or allow the lad some solitude to gather his thoughts. A footfall behind me heralded a maidservant with a steaming jug of water so I stepped aside to let her pass.

'You must want to change.' Temar nodded at my sodden leather boots. His tight smile didn't quite meet his eyes so I took the hint and withdrew, pulling his door closed.

A quick trip to the kitchens housed across the courtyard meant I could leave my cloak in the drying room and once I was satisfied that my orders for the evening's meals were clearly understood, I hurried back to the guest house. I found Casuel and Allin squaring up to each other in the main hall. Her high colour was cruelly unflattering but her folded arms were braced with resolve. Casuel looked more baffled than annoyed, clutching a folded bundle of white.

My arrival gave her the chance to escape. 'I'll see you both at dinner.' With her curtsy a touch too hurried, she walked away just fast enough to betray her eagerness to flee.

'I only asked her to do some mending,' said Casuel crossly.

'I'm sure one of the maids would be glad of the extra work,' I suggested. 'It'll only cost you a few pennies and I don't suppose a wizard's linen is any different to anyone else's.'

The realisation that he was standing there holding his small clothes for any passer by to see sent Casuel scurrying up the stairs. Following at a more leisurely pace, I shed my soaked clothes gratefully, getting my blood flowing again with warm water and vigorous towelling before having a contemplative shave. I needed to know what Temar hoped to achieve on this visit, I decided and some clue as to Velindre's business would be useful. Deciding it wouldn't hurt to remind her of my standing with D'Olbriot, I dressed in the elegant attire my new status entitled me to claim from Toremal's finest tailors at Messire's expense. The price to me was wearing a mossy green that I didn't particularly care for. A knock on my door came as I was buttoning my shirt. It was the Steward of the house with a query about how long we were staying and just how many rooms were required so I took up my more prosaic duties once more.