

Dangerous Waters

Book One of The Hadrumal Crisis

Juliet E McKenna

Chapter One

The Barony of Halferan, Western Caladhria

12th of Aft-Spring

In the 8th Year of Tadriol the Provident of Tormalin

She stood at a crossroads. The lodestone twisted on the pewter chain looped around her fingers. She frowned. Until now the metallic black crystal had led her unerringly in this direction. Now it wavered between two roads.

Jilseth disliked imprecision. Furthermore, she had refined this magic herself, blending an untried combination of spells. If there was some flaw in her understanding, she must find it. She had hoped to submit her discovery to the Council of Wizards on her return to Hadrumal. Not now she wouldn't, if there was some inherent ambiguity in the magic for other mages to seize on.

She could ignore those who'd merely seek to draw out her embarrassment, but she wouldn't risk the possibility that someone might find a solution, claiming a decisive share in the credit for her work.

Jilseth focused on the lodestone, on the power flowing around it. Expanding her wizardly senses, she felt its connection to the damp earth beneath her feet, to the rock below the muddy track, to the elemental iron so far beneath that.

In some remote corner of her mind, she still marvelled that so few could see those lines of power. Even a pigeon could feel their tug. But no, for the mundane majority, the way in which pins were drawn to a shiny black rock was a trivial curiosity, perhaps of use to tailors but no more than that. To Jilseth's wizard sight, the unseen forces flowed through the lodestone unhindered. All was as it should be.

What of the magical use she had made of the crystal? Expanding its affinity to sense any magics manipulating earth and stone. This was an old sorcery, honed by generations of wizards and well practised by Jilseth herself. She found no error there.

The next step. To sense the elemental air, fire and water that combined with the essence of earth to make up the world around her. Magebirth only conveyed a single affinity in most cases; an innate understanding and the ability to influence one of the four elements. It took an apprentice wizard several years of dedicated study to master other magics in addition to those of their birthright, and only then when guided by more experienced mages with a talent for explaining their own instinctive perceptions of the elements.

Now Jilseth's awareness encompassed the breezes ruffling the new leaves on the ill-kempt hedges. She sensed the warmth of the sun lending vigour to those leaves. She felt the water drawn up through the roots spreading vitality throughout the buckthorn.

Jilseth had been a diligent pupil. She had been equally quick to move beyond the magics of each individual element to the next step in her education; to the quadrature wizardry that blended all four into more complex magecraft. That had only been the start.

Along the way she had also learned caution and control. She kept a tight hold of her wizardly instincts lest she be overwhelmed by the intoxicating sensations of the magic. Now her concern must be the second spell that had attuned this lodestone to search for elements beyond her own mageborn, intuitive grasp. This was a new magic not yet recorded in Hadrumal's libraries, never credited to some long dead mage.

Jilseth tempered her pride. She couldn't claim all the credit. Archmage Planir had summoned her along with three other wizards whose talents he'd noted. He had suggested that they share their understanding of their individual affinities to see what they could learn together of quintessential magic. Where quadrate magic stemmed from one wizard combining the four elements into a single spell, quintessential sorceries required four mages to work together, each drawing the element of their affinity into a union that offered wizardry with a scope far beyond anything that a mage working alone could hope to attain. Like the others, Jilseth had relished the challenge.

Standing on the muddy track, she was soon reassured. They had indeed succeeded in attuning this lodestone to find magic borne of any combination of the elements. Better yet, quintessential magic wasn't subject to the vagaries of wizardry still inextricably tied to the vacillating elements. Quintessential sorcery was as robust as the diamond that was its symbol.

Which only left her individual contribution to this artefact. Only Planir knew of that. Only the Archmage could sanction studies in the esoteric discipline she had chosen.

This was the most compelling of the reasons that kept Jilseth in Hadrumal when erstwhile friends and fellow apprentices had quit the wizard island's strictures. Peddling magecraft on the mainland was a far less demanding life.

Though some, it was murmured by pupil wizards in Hadrumal's wine shops, some went to Suthyfer now. Mageborn had lived among those merchants and hired swords engaged in trade across the distant ocean for this past handful of years. The rewards for wizardly aid in defying the deadly storms and tides included liberty for mages to explore their talents however they saw fit. Ideally on some suitably remote reef among the scattered islands that were such vital stepping stones to the empty lands the Tormalin Emperor's men had discovered on the far side of the ocean.

Jilseth couldn't deny such freedom was a tempting thought. But she was an earth mage and Planir the Black was not merely the Archmage. He was the Stone Master of Hadrumal and the finest mage of that affinity in ten generations. Even his critics on the Council of Wizards couldn't deny that. There was no one better to teach her.

Besides, she wasn't some mainland mageborn already uprooted from hearth and home when an adolescent elemental affinity had caused chaos and alarm. Some of her fellow apprentices had been shipped off so swiftly that they arrived on Hadrumal's dockside with only the clothes that they stood up in. Starting a new life a second time, on terms of their own choosing, that wasn't such an overwhelming prospect.

Jilseth was the latest daughter of a line of mageborn five generations long. Her roots in Hadrumal went deep. Perhaps that's why Planir had chosen her for this quest. The Hadrumal mageborn would feel most deeply wronged if Minelas's treachery ever came to light.

She had summoned up the elemental echo of blood spilled and bones broken by the foul renegade's magic at the foot of the cliff where his ship had docked. She had bound this lodestone to every resonance of the rare earths and minerals in those dead men's bodies. The unique reverberation of his spells would lead her to the wizard who had so betrayed his birth and his oaths to Hadrumal.

Focusing all her mage-sense on the conflicted stone, she understood. Her spell was working perfectly well. The lodestone indicated a choice of routes. Either way, she'd find a place where Minelas had worked magic.

The question remained. Which road to take? Jilseth looked around. No one worked in these empty fields. Not a cow nor a sheep cropped the first growth of weedy grass. Even though this sodden coastal region lay as flat as rush matting, no roof or chimney stack rose above the horizon.

Had the Caladhrians already abandoned these coastal regions for fear of corsairs' summer depredations? The raiders coming up from the south had been plaguing this coast

and the sea lanes offshore for a handful of years now and the spring equinox usually marked the start of the sailing season.

She closed her eyes, the better to sense any infinitesimal variation in the magical resonance. Now that she knew what she was looking for, the difference soon became clear. Minelas had worked magic in two places. He had only killed in one and that had been his most recent magecraft. She must follow the road to the shore.

Jilseth began walking. Twenty or so paces on, the tug of the lodestone drew stronger. The shining grey crystal swung upwards to pull its chain out straight ahead, true as a mariner's compass needle. This was definitely the right path, even if she must measure every pace of it with her own feet.

Not for the first time on this quest, she cursed one limitation of magic. Not only of her magic. All wizards were similarly bound, whatever the tavern tales might say of their uncanny ability to step across hundreds of leagues in a blinding flash of light.

While almost every wizard worthy of the name could use magic to travel from place to place, they could only revisit somewhere they had already been. If not, like Jilseth on this journey, mages were subject like everyone else to the inconveniences of ill-sprung coaches, lame or recalcitrant horses, rutted and mud-choked roads.

Since the best the last village could offer had been a plodding ox cart, Jilseth had opted to walk. At least she could use a sling of woven air to relieve the burden of the battered leather sack she carried, its drawstring over her shoulder.

In the event that she encountered some peasants, or even trailblazing corsairs, she didn't anticipate trouble. Her modest gown was the soft shade of a pigeon's wing, the better to travel unnoticed. There was little else in her appearance to prompt unwelcome interest, even if this spring sunshine found some auburn glints in her long brown hair. Only her luminous hazel eyes might prompt a second glance.

In any event, she could wrap herself in elemental air and simply disappear, leaving the Caladhrian bogtrotters to entertain their mud-stained friends with a tavern tale of encountering a magewoman. Corsairs could flee trembling at the thought of their narrow escape from a wizard's wrath.

She followed the lodestone's continuing pull as the buckthorn hedged fields gave way to open pasture, still with no sign of livestock.

So Minelas had killed a second time. That was an unwelcome revelation, if not entirely unexpected. Jilseth scowled as she trudged along the muddy track. She'd been unpleasantly surprised by tavern tales on this journey, as she sat unnoticed in some corner with a bowl of unremarkable pottage. These mainlanders were far too eager to dwell on magecraft's potential for violence.

There'd been no such stories told in her childhood. Even islanders on Hadrumal with no elemental affinity knew the reality of wizardry. There was no need for wizards to kill. There were countless other ways in which Minelas could have evaded pursuit, when his arrival on Caladhria's shore had been threatened by mounted assailants. Villains they might have been, Jilseth allowed, but Minelas had killed them merely to show off his powers to the awestruck Caladhrians who hoped to hire him to defend them from the corsairs.

As her leather half-boots squelched, another gloss of magic kept them and her stockinged feet within safe from insidious dampness. The ground underfoot was growing markedly wetter, the air dank with the scent of decay. Not the death she was seeking; merely the slow rot of sedge and rushes into the brackish water.

Before she had gone half a league further, glistening shallows stretched away to either side. Only the track rose high enough above the salt marsh for a traveller to pass dry-shod. Two horses might ride abreast, if anyone wealthy enough to travel mounted had business in this backwater.

Jilseth studied the moist ground. A whole troop of horsemen had ridden this way. Hoof prints clustered thick in the mud, crossing and overlapping. She sank down to pass a hand over a waterlogged crescent. A handful of days ago.

She sighed. Then again, not so very long ago, she'd been ten whole days behind Minelas. She was closing in on him. Standing up, she continued, glancing back and forth from the hovering lodestone to the water-blurred path ahead.

It took no magic to mark her destination. Vegetation lay broken on either side of the track. Mud was churned up all around, darkened with lingering bloodstains. Jilseth shoved the lodestone into a pocket in the folds of her skirt and her touch quelled its sorcery. She didn't want any distractions.

Now she could use her chosen expertise. The magic which only those born with an earth affinity could even attempt to master. Nearly all chose to shun it, repelled by its very name without even attempting to understand its fascinations. Necromancy.

Where were the bodies? Jilseth frowned once again. Finding them should have been simplicity. She added a touch of fire to her mage-sense. The mainland custom was always to burn bodies on funeral pyres. That said, if anyone had tried building a pyre here, from sodden wood and green leaves, she wished them luck. They'd need a wizard to raise even a spark and Minelas would have no interest in reducing his victims to ash for a funeral urn.

There! Her wizard sight glimpsed a sunken body deep in the fen. The corpse itself was a horse but Jilseth's necromantic perception could see the dead man trapped beneath it.

Green magelight spread around her feet; the emerald hue of water magic. With her own affinity so focused, she had scant attention to spare for concealing her other workings. It hardly mattered. There was no one here to see but some frogs.

Once off the path, her wizardry ensured her firm footing a handspan above the muddy water. She walked over to the dead horse. Reed lizards had gnawed its ears and nose while some larger scavenger had ripped into its underbelly, releasing bloated entrails into the bog.

A sparkling sapphire veil of air defended Jilseth from the stench. She carefully balanced that spell with the contrary force of the water magic beneath her. By comparison, heaving the horse's dead weight aside demanded a trifle of her inborn affinity with the earth, an amber haze barely colouring the air.

As the dead horse sprawled with a noisome splash she saw the man's corpse. Jilseth locked her anger in that remote corner of her mind where she was accustomed to shove such distractions. Unbridled emotion threw wizardry into confusion, from highest to lowest, and she couldn't afford that here.

The dead man wore a woollen shirt beneath a scuffed leather tunic and buff breeches. A base metal brooch fastened the coarse cloak wrapped around his shoulders. He'd had greying hair but beyond that, no one would ever know him again. Worms and crabs had eaten their fill from his discoloured hands and face.

Jilseth wondered what twist of fortune had left this Caladhrian rotting faceless in the marshes. Well, she could soon find out and those mindless scavengers had made her task a little easier. A necromantic touch plucked a finger from his ravaged hand. She only needed the smallest of bones.

Walking back to solid ground, she unslung the leather sack from her shoulder. The black cloak she had stuffed in the top could protect her skirts from the damp ground. She needed all her energies for other magecraft now.

Folding the heavy cloth, she sat cross legged upon it. The dead man's finger hovered beside her as she took her things from the leather sack. A silver bowl. A small, securely stoppered bottle. She uncorked it to pour clear oil into the bowl. It trickled slow as honey. As she passed her hand over the liquid, amber radiance glowed.

Her gesture sent the dead man's finger into the bowl. The oil seethed, amber magic darkening. Jilseth swept her hands through the steam and thickening smoke, deftly shaping a latticed orb threaded with golden magelight.

A vision formed at its heart. The dead man's last moments. He'd been riding into battle with the troop whose horses had left these hoof prints. Jilseth could see the resolve in their faces.

The dead man turned in his saddle to rebut some comment behind him. 'He's no milksop. He couldn't handle that stallion if he was.'

His nod told Jilseth who he meant. Blue-cloaked, some way ahead, Minelas was riding beside that poor fool of a baron.

As soon as Jilseth learned his name, that noble lord would be answering to the Archmage and the Council of Hadrimal alongside the renegade mage. The edict was absolute. Wizards did not engage in warfare. No matter how grievously these coastal regions had suffered at the hands of the raiders, Minelas had no business taking Caladhrian gold in return for unsanctioned magic killing the corsairs.

So what exactly had happened? Jilseth concentrated on her spell. Once she knew the extent of his guilt, Minelas would learn the true meaning of the Archmage's wrath.

'This is salt marsh.' The dead man was pointing something out to the man riding beside him. The captain of the troop, judging by his finer linen and padded green tunic. 'See, sapphire and spearweed.'

As the man nodded at the saw-edged plants, blue magelight flickered. Minelas's magelight. His affinity was with the air. Lightning flashed across Jilseth's spell.

Another burst of radiance followed. Water and mud exploded all around.

The dead man yelped with pain as an arrow bit deep into the back of his shoulder. The Caladhrian troopers were shouting and drawing their swords. Their mounts plunged and snorted, obedience sorely tested by their terror.

More arrows struck men and beasts alike. A cry went up to dismount but the dead man was desperately clinging on as his horse reared up. It lashed out with iron shod hooves as black clad raiders emerged from the marshes.

Jilseth's contempt for Minelas deepened. He had led these men straight into an ambush. So much for his wizardry giving them an edge against the corsair raiders.

Worse, his lurid magecraft was doing far more harm than good. One Caladhrian's swinging sword cut through a floating ball of lightning. The magic killed him in an instant.

The wounded man's horse reared again and this time he lost his grip. He screamed as he hit the ground. Blood gushed from the ragged wound and he couldn't reach to staunch it.

Corsairs clubbed the surviving Caladhrians into submission on all sides. Jilseth leaned forward, brow furrowed, her careful hands never slowing. The black-clad raiders were carrying chains.

'What do they want?' a boy with a bloodied face quavered.

'We want slaves,' a swarthy rogue grinned.

'No!' The boy raised defiant fists.

The Caladhrian trooper beside him sent the youth sprawling into the mud. 'Don't be a fool.'

'Listen to him,' the raider advised as he chained the older man's unresisting wrists and claimed his weapons. 'You might live to see tomorrow.'

The necromantic spell flickered horribly. The wounded man wouldn't see another day.

Jilseth gasped, shocked. The Caladhrian baron lay face down in the mud, his captor's boot on his neck. A heavy-set corsair strode towards Minelas with his welcoming hand outstretched. The wizard brushed fragments of azure light from his gloves and nodded a greeting.

The spell-crafted vision was cut short as the dead man's head was wrenched backwards. The Caladhrian's last sight was the cloudless spring sky as a corsair cut his throat. Abrupt as a slamming door, the necromancy died.

Had she truly understood what she had seen? Jilseth licked dry lips as she reshaped the mingled magelight and smoke. The illusion of the dead man returned and the same events unfolded. Fighting a growing tremor in her hands, Jilseth strained her ears to pick every word from the confusion. She searched the fading edges of the vision for Minelas to see what he was doing.

She would have done so a third time but weariness defeated her. Her hands sank into her lap and the amber radiance in the oil faded. She closed her eyes for a moment. Only a moment.

A sweep of her hand sent the oil back to its bottle, leaving the silver bowl spotless. A flick of sapphire air magic tossed the dead man's finger into the reeds. As long as she kept weaving the spell, she could watch the men die time and again. Once she let the magic unravel, there was no recalling their fate, not from that bone anyway. Necromantic visions could only be summoned once from any mortal remains.

Though the faint scent of cooked meat lingered, that wasn't what made Jilseth nauseous. She took a brass mirror from her leather sack and kindled a stub of candle with a crimson spark springing from the snap of her fingers. Ruby reflections swirled around the polished metal.

'Jilseth?' A distant voice floated through the circling magic.

'It's worse than we thought.' She wasted no time on courtesies. 'Minelas took the Caladhrian baron's gold but then he betrayed him. He led the whole troop into a trap so the corsairs could take them as slaves. The raiders' captain hailed him as a friend.'

'A friend who will doubtless reward him.' The Archmage's anger rang across the countless leagues bridged by the spell. 'Minelas is out to make money from the Caladhrians' fight without redeeming his pledge to use magic.'

'His spells foiled all their attempts to fight back.'

Jilseth was still appalled by Minelas's treachery. She'd long known he was greedy and lazy, but it had been a shock to realise that he had no hint of a conscience.

'That breaks the edict as surely as using his own magic to kill,' The Archmage said grimly. 'What of the noble baron?'

'He's dead.' Jilseth had seen him murdered by the raiders' leader as she revisited the vision.

'Then he's beyond our chastising.' Planir sighed. 'I see no reason to add to his widow's grief by accusing him, not when that could see this whole disgrace dragged into the daylight.'

Jilseth looked around the ravaged marsh. Her necromantic sight indicated more corpses. 'Should I do anything more here?'

'Find his body, you mean?' The Archmage's intuition wasn't hampered by the distance between them. 'No, regrettably. The less anyone knows of your presence there, the better. There'll soon be a search, when the baron and his troop don't return home. Follow Minelas. Our business is with him now.'

'Of course.' Jilseth was already wondering what penalties the renegade would face, accused before the Council of Wizards.

'Be careful.' The Archmage's warning ended the bespeaking spell.

Putting candle and mirror in the bag, Jilseth stood up to shake the wet mud from her cloak. A feeble crackle of grey magelight carried the dirt away. Folding the pristine cloth, she stowed it away and pulled the drawstring tight.

As she took the ensorcelled lodestone out of her pocket, her innate affinity reawakened the spells within it. The darkly glistening gem led her onwards until scant moments later it dangled, limp and useless.

Jilseth didn't need to examine her magic. She had felt the snap of the spell in her bones, a thread broken beyond mending. Minelas's air-born wizardry had carried him away, directly in opposition to the earth magic underpinning her own sorcery.

Did he know that he was pursued? But Planir had only shared his suspicions with her. Minelas could have no reason to suspect he'd attracted the Archmage's attentions.

On the other hand, he'd know the Caladhrians would be out for his blood once they knew his promises of magical aid were lies, worse than lies, if they ever learned the true depth of his betrayal. If they didn't have magic to find him, they had scent hounds and experienced huntsmen, well able to track him through this wilderness.

Jilseth glared at the spreading salt marsh. If she sought any other mage, it would be the work of moments to ensorcel some water with ink or oil and scry out the renegade's hidey-hole. But Minelas had studied all the ways to hide himself from scrying and devised new ones of his own. Such diligence in an otherwise indifferent student had been one of the first things to catch Planir's interest.

She would have to return to Hadrumal and wait for the Archmage's discreet allies ashore to send fresh word of the treacherous mage. Every one of Planir's enquiry agents would be seeking him now. As soon as Jilseth could stand where he had once stood, the lodestone would find him again. Sooner or later she would catch up with Minelas. As long as herons and toads were the only witnesses to this depravity, Hadrumal's reputation would remain unsullied.

In the next breath, she was gone.

Chapter Two

*In the domain of Nahik Jagai
23rd of For-Summer
In the 8th Year of Tadriol the Provident of Tormalin*

Corrain looked up. The whip master was striding along the walkway that cut the deck of the galley in two. The raised width of planking ran from the stern platform to the prow, a solid barrier between these rowers and those on their benches on the other half of the deck. Shouting in his southern barbarian tongue, to someone on the prow platform which the rowers couldn't see as they sat facing the rear of the ship, the whip master sounded like a cat choking on a hairball.

The brute took his orders from the galley master; Corrain had worked that much out. The galley master relaxed in a comfortable chair up there on the stern platform beside the steersman who wrestled the single vast oar that did duty instead of a tiller.

Two slaves scurried to do the whip master's bidding. Trusted slaves; not chained like the rest even if they remained marked out by their ragged heads and beards. Only the galley crew enjoyed the luxury of razors and shears, some going so far as to shave themselves bare as a newborn babe.

Corrain didn't blame them. He'd have done the same given half the chance. Lice were a constant torment for the rowers, especially for the mainland captives who had far more body hair than the darker skinned Archipelagans. With everyone stripped to the waist that was painfully apparent.

The piping flute which he'd come to loathe slowed and stopped with a trill. Though Corrain couldn't understand the Aldabreshin language, he'd learned those signals soon enough. Along with the rest of the fettered rowers sitting at this oar, he raised its blade free of the water and drew it inboard to rest on the bulwark running along the side of the ship.

Corrain seized the respite to reckon up his count of everything that had happened since the corsairs had enslaved him. Sixteen days after that and he'd been sold like some fattened hog on an auction block, on a nameless beach in the Archipelago. That was when he'd lost sight of half of those to survive the wizard's treachery back in Caladhria.

Eight days after that and he'd arrived at the anchorage where, forced to fight for the corsairs' entertainment, more of his comrades had died. Were they the lucky ones, or those like himself, who'd won their fights and been shared out among the galley captains to be chained to these oars?

The dead weren't going to be whipped into helping the very raiders who plagued Caladhria. It had taken Corrain some while to realise it, but the anchorage was home to yet more of those accursed corsairs.

A contingent of warriors had embarked on the galley for this voyage. They wore no chains, and though none were clean shaven like the mariners, they kept their hair and beards cropped short, offering no hand hold to a foe in a fight. These were free men, as far as Corrain could tell, even if they lived in little more comfort than the rowers, bedding down on the decking at prow and stern.

They all looked to a man who could only be their captain. Corrain had spent his adult life as a trooper in his lord's service. He knew fighting men when he saw them. Raiders, every last one of the scum.

How long before they were forced to row north so these savages could pillage and rape? The sailing season was well advanced now, even if in the fifty one days since they'd arrived at the corsair anchorage, the galley had only rowed from island to island within the Archipelago. Fifty one days? Fifty two? Uncertainty gnawed at his gut as cruelly as hunger.

What was happening now? Every few days they were released from their oars to haul water from the sea and to wash down the decks but they'd done that just this morning.

Corrain watched the trusted slaves open one of the lockers beneath the walkway. One dragged out a basket while the other uncapped a battered leather flagon, tall as a top-boot and doubtless plundered from some mainland tavern.

The man chained beside him on the inboard side of their shared oar sat up straighter. So did most of the rest of the rowers as the whip master's trusted slaves began walking alongside the benches.

The one with the basket was dipping torn hunks of what passed for bread in these nightmare islands into the flagon. The rowers were passing the dripping sops along to those sat by the bulwark pierced with oar ports, the chains fettering their feet jingling.

It was some while before the slaves handing out the soaked bread reached Corrain's bench, twelfth of the twenty five on this side of the galley. He was the middle of the five men forced to sit there, their feet shackled together and secured by a heavier chain running through the loop between each man's ankles, secured at both ends with formidable locks.

As the slaves with the basket and flagon reached them, Corrain held out his hand. His stomach growled with desperate anticipation. The man sat on his bulwark side laughed. Corrain paused before handing him the first sop, meeting his eyes with a warning stare.

He couldn't guess where this man had come from, paler of skin than the islanders though darker than the captured Caladhrians. Was that the touch of the sun or a natural burnish in his blood? Corrain had tried asking but if they shared some common tongue, the man was keeping that to himself. He didn't talk to anyone, not that Corrain had seen.

One of the trusted slaves said something and the man shrugged. He passed the sodden bread on to the youth sitting at the outermost end of their oar. Hosh stuffed it into his mouth, whimpering with gratitude.

Corrain breathed a little more easily. While he reckoned he was stronger than the silent man, he didn't relish the thought of fighting in the cramped space between the benches some dark night, in order to teach the silent man that Hosh was under his protection.

He passed the silent man the next sop and then ate his own. He nearly choked. The bread had been dipped in wine harsh enough to clean old pots and liberally mixed with white brandy.

But Corrain had always heard that the Aldabreshi scorned strong drink. That was what everyone said. They didn't have the head for it, so Caladhria's tavern warriors insisted with scornful amusement. So much for that homespun wisdom.

The two slaves on his inboard hand exchanged a few words as the whip master's lackeys moved on. Both were Archipelagans or of mixed blood, dark of hair and eye. Corrain couldn't understand a word they spoke and they knew nothing of his own Caladhrian dialect or of formal Tormalin, used right across the mainland by merchants and traders, legacy of that long vanished Empire's hegemony.

Regardless, Corrain treated the inboard rowers with wary respect. It was self-evident that the strongest men were set to hauling the innermost ends of the oars. When the heavy chain at their feet was unlocked, releasing them from the oar to sleep, they were the ones who enjoyed the comparative comfort of the bench padded with flock-stuffed sackcloth and crudely cured goat hide.

Corrain swallowed his pride and slept as best he could down on the planks with the others. That way he could keep an eye on Hosh. The stronger slaves would prey on the weakest, given half a chance.

'Corrain,' Hosh quavered. 'What's going on?'

'Shut up and eat your bread,' Corrain growled.

He looked to make sure that Hosh was eating his sop. The lad needed every scrap of food to sustain him, to maintain the pace which the whip master's flute player demanded. Corrain had earned his muscles through years of sword play whereas Hosh had only joined Lord Halferan's guard at the turn of the New Year gone. Corrain had served nineteen years and risen to a captaincy before his own folly saw him thrust back down the ladder to serve as a trooper and be grateful for that leniency.

Corrain's heart pounded painfully in his chest. Of all those enslaved when that foul mage betrayed Lord Halferan, only Hosh remained of the handful purchased by this galley master.

Greff's leg had been accidentally gashed when they had first been fettered. The wound had ulcerated in the moist heat, leaving Greff weak and feverish. As it festered, the whip master had sent one of his two underlings to unchain him. Were they going to tend him? Corrain hadn't shared Hosh's hope. He had been right. Greff was stabbed in the back of the neck and his corpse thrown to the sharks that constantly shadowed the ship.

Someone had strangled Orlon quietly one night, his body discovered the following morning. Hauled up onto the walkway, one by one his bench-mates were tied to the upthrust stern post. None would say what had happened, despite being brutally flogged by the overseers.

As for Kessle and Lamath? Corrain only knew that replies no longer came from the far benches, unseen beyond the walkway dividing the deck, when he risked shouting their names in the darkness.

'Corrain?' Hosh begged for reassurance.

The whip master's overseers had hauled a rower up from an oar some way ahead. His bound hands were tied to the stern post and the crack of the whip sent a shiver through the rowers from stern to prow. Somewhere behind, some corsair raider laughed callously.

'You've done nothing wrong. You've nothing to fear.' Corrain only hoped that was true. A flogging would most likely be the death of either of them.

Beaten senseless, violent or recalcitrant slaves might be briefly revived by the agony of having vinegar and salt rubbed into their wounds to keep the flies away. Then they were thrown down the stern hatch into the hold, into the narrow space between the galley master's cabin at the rear and the locked compartments for looted cargo.

By Corrain's count, fewer than one man in five emerged. The rest were hauled out lifeless, already gnawed by rats, and tossed overboard to delight the sharks. Corrain had taken his turn at that grisly task, as had Hosh. Corrain reckoned the whip master wanted the new slaves to see what fate awaited anyone contemplating disobedience.

How long could Hosh endure this torment? A sword pommel clubbing him into submission when they had been captured had left a visible dent beside the boy's broken nose. While his bruises had faded, he was now plagued with a constantly weeping eye and an oozing nostril.

'Remember your oath, boy. Our allegiance to Halferan holds.' Corrain had made the lad swear to return and see that treacherous wizard hanged. If Hosh died—

No, he wouldn't contemplate that possibility. They had come this far together. They would get back home. They would have their vengeance. The sour wine and liquor warmed his blood and limbs.

The overseer finished flogging the man. To Corrain's surprise, he was returned to his oar, still conscious albeit with blood coursing down his back. The other overseer shouted a warning, the tone unmistakable even if the words were meaningless. The inboard rowers on their oar exchanged a cowed look.

Corrain hastily swallowed the last of the sodden bread as the whip master blew his silver whistle. The flute-player replied with a piercing note. Like everyone else, the five of them hastily readied their oar before either overseer cracked a lash over some laggard's head.

The whip master set the pace, swift and merciless. The flute-player took up the rhythm and the oars dug deep into the waves. The galley surged forward.

If he couldn't see where they were headed, Corrain strove to see what was going on aboard the galley. Raiders were hurrying back and forth from prow to stern and back again. Leather-wrapped bundles were being hauled up from the hold below. Armour and weapons, he soon realised. They didn't have to row all the way to the mainland to find themselves going into battle.

As his hauling arms slackened at the thought, the others were taken unawares. Their oar briefly faltered. An overseer's warning was backed up with a lick of his whip to raise a welt on their innermost rower's shoulder. The man beside Corrain growled a fierce rebuke.

'Sorry,' Corrain muttered. He concentrated on keeping a steady rhythm, using all the might in his shoulders, his back, his belly and legs, bare feet wedged against the board that jutted up from the deck.

He had seen enough. Those Archipelagan raiders, nearly as numerous as the rowers, were armouring themselves in stiff leather cuirasses. Some carried swords, others shouldered quivers with short bows in hand.

The whip master's whistle mercilessly increased the pace. The strongest rowers strained to keep up with the piper. A couple of armoured Aldabreshi ran along the top of the narrow bulwark on the outboard side of the ship. A single slip and they would fall to a brutal death among the scything oars.

The Aldabreshi didn't fall. Instead they hauled on ropes to spread out a great expanse of cloth. It was suspended somehow from the galley's single mast which Corrain had begun to think was only there for hanging signal flags.

Was the awning to shield the rowers from the punishing sun? As Corrain looked up, he saw the cloth twitch. Dark silhouettes of arrows lay snagged overhead. An excruciating itch burned between his shoulder blades. If some lucky shaft tore a hole, an arrow could bury itself in his back and he wouldn't even see it coming.

A taste of smoke drove that fear away with worse. Corrain snatched a desperate glance over his shoulder to see if something had set the awning alight. If the galley caught fire, chained as they were to their oars, they would sit there burning alive until the waves overwhelmed the sinking vessel to drown any who'd survived that long.

'Corrain? Are we dead men?'

As the silent man's mocking laugh drowned out Hosh's terrified plea, Corrain caught a glimpse of what was happening up on the crowded prow. He shouted what little reassurance he could.

'It's only charcoal, Hosh. They've lit a brazier.'

As he wondered why, as Hosh appealed for more answers, Corrain saw two Archipelagans hauling a barrel up from the hold and dragging it towards the prow. He risked twisting around a second time, ignoring the inboard man's furious snarl.

An Archipelagan reached into the barrel and took out something roughly the size and shape of a pomegranate. He reached for a wooden-handled copper spike thrust deep into the bright heart of the charcoal. Touching the glowing metal to a thick thread trailing from the pomegranate, he waited a moment to be sure it was alight. Then he hurled the thing high and hard, right over the galley's prow towards whatever lay ahead of them.

Sticky fire. Corrain had heard of that Archipelagan abomination, though he'd never seen it for himself.

Before he could speculate further, the overseers' screaming reached a new frenzy. The whip master blew rapid trills on his whistle. Before Corrain could guess what any of this meant, he was struck hard in the chest by their own oar.

The galley had come to a complete stop amid a horrendous cacophony of splintering wood and screaming voices. The armoured men waiting in the stern charged up the walkway. From the sounds of clashing swords and agonised yells, those who'd been in the prow had already joined battle.

Were he and Hosh unwilling partners in a corsair attack on some Caladhrian trading vessel? Even with the raiders prowling the sea lanes, trade between the mainland and Archipelago was too lucrative and too widespread to be significantly interrupted.

Were they attacking some other Aldabreshin ship? Everyone said that southern barbarians fought each other like packs of wild dogs. If it was an Archipelagan ship, did it carry better swordsmen than their own?

If it did, Corrain could hope that their own galley master, the whip master and his overseers would find themselves captured and burdened with chains, some token of natural justice. But if the rowers were sold on again like brute beasts brought to market, there was no knowing where he and Hosh might end up. Worse, they might be separated.

Corrain closed his eyes amid the incomprehensible shouting. He was still alive. Hosh was still alive. As long as they were alive, they could hold fast to their oath. They could cling to the hope of one day seeing Minelas punished for his treachery.

Wherever the wizard had gone, whatever he had done in the meantime, once he got back to the mainland, Corrain promised himself that he would hack the bastard's head from his shoulders and piss down the bleeding stump of his neck.

Aye, and he'd tell everyone from the eastern ocean to the western forests, from the southern shore to the northern mountains, why he'd done it. Those wizards of Hadrumal had been so virtuous and upright, swearing on the sanctity of their precious edict.

Corrain would see them all shamed for the perfidious liars that they were.