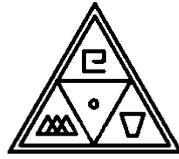


THE SWORDSMAN'S OATH
The Second Tale of Einarinn
Juliet E McKenna



Chapter One

From Planir, Archmage of Hadrumal, to Messire Guliel D'Olbriot, Sieur of that House and Keeper of the Honour of the Name, Adjurist of the Convocation of Princes and Patron of the Empire, Solstice salutations and most heartfelt wishes for prosperity and health in the year to come.

My dear Sieur,

I am most grateful to you for intelligence of the Elietimm ships wrecked on your coasts over the For-Winter season. I have not forgotten the narrow escape of both your man and mine in their recent encounter with that race and may I assure you I remain sensible of the threat to your domains and the wider peace of the Empire. Beyond such important but necessarily impersonal concerns, I would venture to remind you that just as you lost a sworn man in Aiten, I lost a scholar in Geris, a man of much learning that might have aided us both against this threat, though of course, nothing outweighs the loss of both their lives. I do not forget such debits in the scales, as I am sure you do not.

Your letter encourages me to think that you realise, as do I, that our interests lie along the same road in this matter. Just as you face the very real danger of hostile forces landing on your coasts, or worse, to lie concealed in the unpopulated reaches of Dalasor or Gidesta, so I am faced with the threat of a complex magic whose mysteries we in Hadrumal are still unravelling. On that subject may I assure you that there can be no shame or blame attached to your man Aiten, for his attack on my mage Shivvalan. There can be no doubt that had his mind not be invaded by the foul enchantments of the Elietimm, he would have fought to the end in defence of his honour and your Name.

Thank you for your enquiries after Shivvalan; he is quite recovered and eager to do his part in foiling the schemes of the Elietimm. You also mentioned the pleasure with which you received the sword that I discovered so unfortunately concealed by an elderly and somewhat eccentric wizard but your thanks are unnecessary. It is sufficient recompense that you approved my suggestion to present the blade to your sworn man Ryshad Tathel. I was most impressed by his resourcefulness and courage in the face of dire trials and it seemed only fitting that such an heirloom should be used once more to defend the Empire, in service of so great a House.

On that subject, I have a favour to request of you. I continue my researches into the mysteries of this ancient magic and as you will know, from your own nephew's fate, this does seem to attract the unwelcome attentions of those Elietimm at large in our lands. While my wizards have many talents, swordsmen they are not. Should you be willing to grant me the use of your man Ryshad, I can certainly put his undoubted talents to use worthy of your House. The more we learn of these Elietimm and the quicker we do it, the better it will go for both of us.



*The Highroad towards Cotebridge,
in the Lescari Dukedom of Marlier,
8th of Aft-Spring in the Second Year of Tadriol the Provident*

How do you apologise to a grieving mother for not being the man who killed her son? Another might have Aiten's blood on her hands but I was still more deeply stained with shame that I had been unable to raise my sword against my friend of so many years to free him from the foul enchantment that had claimed his mind and his will, even at that ultimate cost. I'd tried to explain away my failure but my halting words had hung in the air, twisting awkwardly like crows on a gibbet. Had that visit to his family all been a dreadful mistake? No; my honour demanded it, if I were to be able to look myself in the eye as I shaved of a morning and see a man true to his oath.

Things had improved a little when Aiten's father and brothers had decided getting soaked in homemade applejack was the best way of honouring his memory. Everyone had told a story about Aiten and some of them even stayed funny when I recalled them sober. A sour morning-after with a head as thick as winter fog and my mouth tasting like a pissed-in boot had been a small price to pay.

My smile faded as I recalled Tirsa, Aiten's sister. A middling brown haired girl with soft brown eyes and a pleasant smile; the sort of lass you see by the handful at markets clean across the Old Empire. Only I'd be able to pick her out from a festival crowd at a hundred paces, and it would still cut me like a whetted knife in ten years time, she was so like Aiten to look at.

Remembering the grief in Aiten's mother's face as she clutched the bundle of his possessions to her breast and tried to breathe in the last scent of her lost child, had me sufficiently distracted not to notice the bandits lurking in the hedgerow. Showers of rain on and off all morning had left the sky as grey as my mood and despite it fairing up, I still had my hood raised. None of this excuses my lapse; I certainly should have remembered the roads in Lescar are always more dangerous outside the fighting seasons, as perverse as anything else in that benighted land.

One of the vermin had my bridle before I could gather reins or wits. The startled horse reared backwards and as I felt its hooves slip in the mire of the sodden road, I kicked my feet free of the irons, barely keeping my own footing as I leaped clear. Shaking and sweating, the horse snapped at the grabbing hands of the bandits to escape up the road, leaving me facing the filthy gang of them.

'Pay your toll, pal and we'll let you pass,' the foremost said, grinning widely, blackened stumps in his slimy gums.

I shook my head at the leader. These sorry discards from some defeated militia weren't going to be much of a challenge to me. They were all gaunt and hungry, matted and filthy, driven to scavenging like desperate dog-foxes after a long winter of lean pickings. Still, desperation makes for dangerous men, I reminded myself.

I backed down the rutted road a few paces, to draw them out far enough to be sure there were only four of them. Lescari, cowshit between their ears as well as between their toes since I could now be certain they had put no one behind me to cut off any retreat. I could certainly outpace them if I chose to turn tail and run, but I didn't fancy trying to make my way through the unknown muddy byways off the highroad. As my hand moved towards my

sword hilt, parchment in my pocket crackled, reminding me of my duty to my patron's orders.

Besides, I didn't feel inclined to run; Dast's teeth, why should I? I wanted my horse back too. It was a good beast, from Messire's own stable and I'd been riding it no more than seven or eight leagues a day to husband its strength. 'Sorry, friend, you didn't say whose authority you had to levy a toll?' I kept my voice neutral.

'This is all the authority I need!' He struck a challenging pose with his notched sword, evidently aiming to impress in his rusty breastplate, fringed with inadequate chain mail.

His pack grinned, all bold in remnants of ill-fitting armour. More fool them; the leather of my thick buff coat covered a layer of metal plates without the vulnerabilities I was assessing in my opponents as they smirked. I don't wear a hauberk, it attracts notice and my usefulness to my prince depends on going unremarked. I laid a hand to my own sword, sparkling silver on the pommel, polished scabbard bright in a watery gleam of fugitive sunlight now that the rain had stopped.

'What's your charge?' I asked, face calm, mind anticipating the next moves. I spend long seasons trying to teach the militia raised for the House of D'Olbriot that there's no virtue in fighting if you can avoid it but Lescaris learn the opposite in their leading strings, from their warring dukes down, to the endless grief of their torn and bleeding land.

The leader finally registered my unfamiliar accent. 'Tormalin man, are you? Fancy words, fancy horse and blade. What you've got in your purse that'll be the rate for the road!'

Evidently a man with no more sense than Dastennin gave a flatfish. 'I'll give you the price of a meal.' I smiled without humour. 'You can thank the Lord of the Sea for that.'

The other three looked tempted by the thought of food they could pay for rather than a fight for their dinner, as I had suspected. The leader scowled, unwilling to back down. 'We'll spare a coin to Talagrin at the next shrine, when we've sold your horse and your gear, thank the Hunter for sending us a plump pigeon ripe for the plucking.'

'You want to try for my feathers?' I drew my sword, it slid gleaming from the scabbard with a steely rasp and the rusty weapons facing me wavered. 'Why? I'm carrying nothing but letters from my patron.'

I wouldn't have been bandying words with outcasts before I'd visited Aiten's family, I reflected. Not when I'd been carrying enough true-minted Tormalin gold to buy up half this sorry fiefdom. I wasn't the only one looking to defend my honour, the coin reflecting the value Messire D'Olbriot put on Aiten's oath now his death demanded its redemption. I forced myself to lay it aside the burden of my own guilt while I dealt with these vermin.

'Sworn man, are you?' the foremost sneered, letting his sword point dip as he scratched his lice infested head. 'Lickspittle to some fat-arsed prince who spends all his days with his head in a jug, playing with himself. That's how you pass your time, isn't it, wringing the goose's neck?'

His fellow footpads snickered at this but I am long past the days when cheap insults enraged me. A true swordsman knows hot fury kills more men than cold steel. I backed away another pace, drawing him forward beyond the dubious protection of his fellows. Messire's militia are never so easily gulled, not after I've brought them to heel.

'So what have you got to say for yourself, curly? Come on, hand over your coin and that belt pouch for a start! Well, answer me, curse you, unless you're too busy shitting yourself.'

My continued silence was unnerving Foul-mouth's supporters by now, as I intended.

'All right lads, let's have the bastard!' He took a bold step, rusty blade levelled.

I glared at the closest one to Foul-mouth's off hand who took an involuntary pace back. Idiocy was about to kill his mate, that and my sword, but if any of them chose to run, I wasn't about to waste my time hunting them down.

Foul mouth lunged at me, off hand flailing. I stepped sideways to smack his blade up with

the flat of my sword. He took his chance to swing his dirty blade round for a skull splitting strike. I moved in and as his arm came up, I rolled my wrist to drive the point of my keenly polished sword under and deep into his armpit. He collapsed like a ruptured wineskin, blood frothing from his mouth, drowning his shrieks of panic and pain. The others swore in guttural Lescari and one rushed me, stupidity apparently something they shared along with their lice. Sure of my footing, I brought my sword round at belly level, his instinctive parry sending him staggering back. He swung wildly, I evaded the blow with ease and swept low but he managed to leap sideways in time to save his kneecaps and I found I was facing two of them, his mate having found some semblance of courage.

If they'd had any more training than which end of a sword was the handle, I might have had some trouble, but a few rapid strokes hacked through his guard and dropped the first to his knees, clutching the bloody ruin of splintered bone that had once been his sword arm. I punched the luckless mongrel with my off hand and he scrambled into the bushes howling through split lips while the slowest to join battle took to his heels like a scalded hound, slipping in the mud in his haste to save his boil scarred skin, without even the wit to try grabbing my horse.

That left me with a lad, tears carving pale streaks down his filthy face, slime running from his crooked nose as he panted in terror through broken teeth. Life had been kicking this lad in the face since before he could walk.

I managed to rein in my anger; it had been a long and none too happy season for me thus far but that was no excuse for losing control. It had certainly felt good to give vent to the slow-burning rage at Aiten's untimely death that I kept locked in the back of my mind, but I could not afford to indulge such feelings.

I glanced quickly round, saw my horse now browsing on a patch of new grass and considered simply ignoring the boy. No, Dast curse him; he had done nothing to merit such consideration. I feinted to his off side, he swung his trembling weapon in a futile stroke but I had my blade at his throat before he had a hope of recovering. He dropped his stained sword and steam coiled damply around his feet as he pissed himself.

'Mercy, mercy,' he stammered. 'Please, your honour, I'll not do the like again, I swear it, any oath you like, mercy, for pity's sake, Saedrin save me-'

I leaned the edge of the blade into the soft skin of his neck to silence him. Could he be trusted? I doubted it; what would a lad like this know of honour, in a land where the so-called nobility change allegiance with every passing season, scrambling for advantage with rival dukes who have wasted ten generations in a futile struggle for a worthless throne?

'I swear,' he whimpered, desperately trying to swallow without cutting his own throat.

The issue here wasn't his honour though, was it, but my integrity and self-respect. How could I kill some idiot boy who was begging to surrender, frantically offering me his paltry oath?

'Lie down,' I snarled and he dropped into the filth as if he'd been clubbed. Putting my boot heavy on his neck, I hurled his sword deep into a tangled thicket of thorns. I laid my own blade against his face, one red-rimmed, crusted eye blinking at the blood-clotted point as I stroked it slowly up his cheek. 'You lie here and you don't stir until you can't hear my hoof beats. If I see you again this side of the Otherworld, I'll gut you like a herring, do you hear me?'

He nodded frantically, eyes flickering between me and the crumpled, heap of his erstwhile leader, the life drained out of him into the clotted mud. I backed away, ready to finish the lad if he was stupid enough to make a move. No, he had that much wit at least, more motionless than the still quivering corpse next to him.

Checking there were no more surprises lurking among the unkempt hedgerows, I walked slowly towards the horse, not wanting to spook it with the smell of blood. However, it came

readily enough; half a season on the road told it I meant fodder and water. This was definitely a relief; my chances of getting a remount in Lescar were about as slight as that boy's chances of dying in his bed.

I spared a glance back before the curve of the road took me out of sight; the lad was looting the body of his late friend. I rode on, unconcerned. Even if he caught up with me, killing him would be no great task and no dishonour, since he'd have forfeited any claim to mercy along with his oath. The horse halted, raised its tail and dropped a heap of steaming gurry on the road, an entirely fitting comment in my opinion.

The fire in the blood that comes from a fight, however trivial, warmed me for a while and in any case, this late in the season, the weather was increasingly mild. Still, a little anger at myself for getting caught like that seared me as the noon sun rode high above me, drawing wraiths of steam from the sodden ground, the spring air full of the green promise of renewal. I found myself gripped by sudden sadness and reined in to take a drink of water, trying to wash the tight dryness from my throat.

How long it would be before I could think of Aiten without that strangling ache? It was riding alone that was doing it, I realised, after so many years. I was missing his endless supply of dubious jokes, his blade matching mine as we protected each other in any fight we couldn't talk our way out of. One of the corner stones of my life was gone, a certain loss of confidence leaving a hidden hole threatening to trip me, even if it was apparent to no one but me.

I unlaced the neck of my coat; a warm garment in the spring sunshine. My fingers caught in the thong of my medallion, the insignia I bore as a physical reminder of the oaths I had sworn to my prince and he in turn to me. I had Aiten's as well, the bronze disc sewn inside my sword belt, waiting for me to exact a double reckoning in blood from the bastard responsible for his death. Was I going to shove it down the enchanter's throat or ram it edgeways up his arse, I mused? Whichever, I'd sharpen the edges first, just to make a point. By rights, that debt was our master's, to claim or remit but I had made a private vow of vengeance and hammered a nail deep into the door of Dastennin's shrine to affirm it. We make no formal vows as we do to our patron, but the loyalties between sworn men are no less strong.

No, it was time to move on, I told myself. After all but losing myself to the drowning sorrow of my sister's death from fever in my youth, I had found new purpose in taking service with Messire, hadn't I? My duty was to him, my sword his to command.

The usual rat infested hovel that passes for an inn in Lescar came into view as I crested a rise in the road. I was still holding my sword at my side, sticky with bloody detritus, so I gave my horse his head at the water trough and took possession of a rickety bench where I spread out oil and rags to clean the solstice gift Messire D'Olbriot had given me in recognition of my trials in his service the previous year.

It says a lot about Lescar that it wasn't the sight of a man cleaning a bloody weapon that startled the pinch faced little maid coming out to empty her ash bucket, but my accent; my Lescari has all been learned on Messire's business around the border with home. I couldn't fathom her concern; she only had about ten words of Tormalin though I doubt she could have counted them. Eventually I gathered there was no fresh roast so I took the gritty bread and sour cheese offered but declined the greyish stew, congealed in the pot from the night before. Evidently exceeding the reckoning with good Tormalin pennies, I won a startled smile when I declined the halved and quartered coin pieces she tried to offer me. I have no use for Lescari coin, even when it's whole.

As I ate, I fished out the letter I carried, brought by the Imperial Despatch to rescue me from the taut emotions of Aiten's sorrowing family and sending me to ride the empty roads of Lescar over the Equinox festival. Well, that at least had been preferable to lining up with my

brothers to entertain the nicely eligible daughters of Mother's sewing circle. I took up the letter and the description on the outside caught my eye again, still making me smile.

'Ryshad Tathel. An armspan and four fingers tall, thinly built but muscular. Hair black and curly, eyes brown, dark complected, clean-shaven. Softly spoken but with a determined manner.'

My father would have phrased it rather differently; 'stubborn as a mule and twice as hard to shift when he digs his heels in', is what he had said of me to Messire's Sergeant at Arms. That last sentence was written in a different hand. So, Camarl was rising rapidly in Messire's counsels if he was being allowed to add personal notes to the Sieur's letters. Saedrin grant it will be many years before the men of the family have to gather to elect a new head for the House of D'Olbriot but it was starting to look as if I could win a tidy sum with a wager on Camarl. Perhaps I should lay some coin soon, while the odds were still long on a sister's younger son succeeding.

'From Messire D'Olbriot, given at his Toremal residence, the 26th day of For-Spring. To Ryshad Tathel, sworn man.

I send my greetings and my wishes that your trip provides consolation both to yourself and the family bereaved by Aiten's loss. I take this opportunity to repeat my own sorrow at his fate as well as the esteem in which I held him. I ask you to communicate this to his parents once more.

You are no longer required to attend me in Toremal when your visit is concluded. I have received a request from the Archmage of Hadrimal, Planir the Black, that you travel to Caladhria and join with one Shivvalan Ralsere, mage. You will find him with a recluse called Viltred Sern who dwells in the forests to the north of Cote, seat of one Lord Adrin, on the highroad to A Bray.

This mage requests your assistance in continuing the pursuit you shared in at the end of For-Winter past. At such time as the wizard Ralsere no longer has need of you, return to Toremal with all best speed. In the interim, keep me apprised of your movements with letters by Imperial Despatch or such other discreet means as you judge secure.

I am confident that you will perform this commission with your usual capability.

It was smoothly written in the fluent hand of Messire's personal scrivener. I could just picture the Sieur, sat with a pile of documents, disposing of each with terse commands. My spirits rose; I've worked for Messire long enough to read what wasn't written into the letter. I was to be his eyes and ears, his link to the Archmage's plans for foiling the Ice Islanders. This offered better prospects of vengeance for Aiten than chasing garbled reports of foreigners in the backwoods of the ocean coast which is what I'd spent the latter half of winter doing.

I'd had no real dealing with wizards before getting caught up with Shiv the year before and we generally prefer to keep them at arm's length in Tormalin. I wondered what Shiv was up to; he and I owed each other a measure of our lives after that cursed trip to the Ice Islands. Still, his loyalties to his Archmage meant a different lodestone to mine governed his course, I reminded myself.

I ate and headed for the river. The false hope of the noonday sun faded, fine rain mizzling down like exhausted tears. I passed the remnants of a sacked village, reeking with the smell of burned wood rotting after the long winter and weeping black stains into the scorched earth. So much for the Dukedom of Marlier, where life was supposed to be safer than most. I found myself longing for the clean scent of salt on the wind from the ocean at home.

I looked across the valley with its coppices of hazel and ash, past the sprawl of a turf

roofed village amidst a striped patchwork of open fields and over the rough common grazing to the stark crag where the local Baron had his reddish stone castle. Tormalin villages cluster close to the protections of their patron and have done since the Chaos when lordless and landless men ransacked the ruins of the Old Empire. Lescari peasants grub a living from the land as best they can and hope the battles pass them by. I noted the battlements were being raised, straw and clay that had protected the half-built fortifications from frosts stripped away; that could be useful intelligence for Messire. What threat did Marlier see waiting now the Equinox had opened the fighting season? I knew the Duke of Triolle had fouled his own nest comprehensively after heavy losses in the previous year's fighting with Parnillesse. Did he have ambitions here?

Arriving at the river in the mid-afternoon, I found a silent line of grim-faced peasants waiting by the bridge, salvaged possessions in bundles and handcarts, little children all unknowing smiles, older ones wide-eyed and glancing at parents for reassurance seldom forthcoming. I'd been passing pitiful groups like this all through Lescar, trudging along, heads down, locals stopping in their work to watch as the strangers passed, hoes and plough staves in hand, ready to keep anyone moving who might be thinking about trying to stop. My own purse had lightened by a good measure on the road, common coin gone to those who would take it or else spent on as much bread as I could reasonably carry, so I had something I could casually offer those still clinging to the shreds of their dignity.

I rode to the head of the queue, not about to risk hanging about and getting drawn into the quarrels erupting here and there along the line.

'Rein it in.' A burly man-at-arms levelled his pike to bar my way and the rest of his troop stopped lounging on the parapet of the bridge.

'Good day to you.' I dismounted and nodded a precisely calculated half-salute. 'Is there a fee for crossing the bridge?'

He eyed me a little uncertainly. 'That depends on who you are.'

I bet it did; on whether one was a desperate peasant willing to give up a share of any hoarded coin worth having, or a fleeing mercenary who could end up costing a lax border guard a flogging, if he slipped past and was caught looting or worse. Caladhrian lords know full well the bloody chaos of Lescar would soon spill over to choke their lands, if it were not for the depth and swirling current of the Rel and they take guarding the few bridges suitably seriously.

'Well, I am a Tormalin prince's sworn man.' I pulled my amulet from the neck of my shirt and held it out.

'What's your business in Caladhria?' the man asked, open-mouthed.

'My master's,' I replied crisply but politely.

He didn't know what to say to that but he didn't lower his pike either.

'Here.' I held out my hand and he closed his stained fingers on a couple of good Tormalin Marks, not the flimsy leaded coin of Lescar. 'Give some woman on her own with children a free passage, why don't you?'

He cracked a gap-toothed smile at that. 'I reckon I could.'

He planted his pike on its butt and my horse's hooves rang on the planks of the broad bridge. Tormalin-built Old Empire foundations were still solidly defying the murky flow of the mighty Rel, as you would expect, and the intermittently renewed woodwork above was dark from a fresh coat of pitch. More men with pikes lined the sides, ready for any threat of trouble. I stopped by one who looked barely old enough use a blade for shaving, let alone defending his Lord's domains.

I noted the colours and badge on his overlarge livery. 'Are you Lord Adrin's men?'

He nodded cautious agreement. 'That's right.'

'I'm heading for a place called Cote. Which road do I take?'

He frowned at me. ‘Which Cote would that be, then, Mester?’

I frowned in turn, perplexed. ‘How do you mean?’

‘Well, for Upper Cote, Spring Cote, Cote in the Clay and Small Cote, you go upstream, Cotinwood and Hill Cote are downstream and you’d want the west highroad for Nether Cote and Cote Fane.’ This being Caladhria, the lad was genuinely trying to be helpful, not just tweaking my nose.

‘Where’s Lord Adrin’s main residence?’

‘He’s visiting Duryea, his wife’s people, been there since the Equinox.’

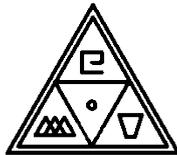
‘And where does he live when he’s not visiting?’

‘All over.’

The lad’s painstaking Tormalin, doubtless learned from some local scholar, was oddly accented and I wasn’t at all sure he was understanding me fully. The Caladhrian I know best is the coastal dialect and this far up country could well confuse things further.

‘Thank you,’ I said, belatedly recalling why Caladhrian was a byword for lackwit back home. This lad couldn’t poke a dead dog with a sharp stick.

Once off the bridge, I spurred the horse clear of the peasants milling about. A knot of lime washed, timber framed houses with wood-shingled roofs clustered around the meeting of the roads; it could have been any small hamlet between the Ocean Coast and western Ensaimin, most distant province where the Empire’s grip had never really taken hold and slipped loose first. I looked vainly for way-stones that might give me some heading and finally drew my lucky rune stick from my pocket. I rolled it between my palms, the Drum came out upright and I headed North on that result.



*The house of Viltred Sern,
west of Cote in the Clay, Caladhria
9th of Aft-Spring*

A sturdily built hut of logs and wooden shingles stood under a shallow crag in a forest clearing, a knot of figures gathered on the smooth turf before it. Their prisoner was an old man, withered with age, hair and beard frosted with white. Bound on his back to a freshly felled log, twigs and splinters pierced him not by deliberate design but through simple carelessness. Manacles were tight around wrists blackened with old blood, drawn by repeated writhing against the cruel restraints. His captors stood in a loose half circle, black clad in leather and metal, faces flat with disinterest, men with unvarying blond hair and stocky builds. Their leader stood at the head of the hapless victim, calm as his irons reheated in the small wood fire. The smoke rose and coiled away into the clear blue sky, the first leaves of the new season green and fresh on the trees. Blood dripped slowly from ruined hands, fingers broken, jagged edges of bone jutting through skin, nails ripped out with calculated brutality. The victim’s ribs heaved in sudden spasm, skin stark white through the smears of blood as his chest fluttered like a half-killed bird and abruptly stilled. Gory pits where eyes should have been wept tears of anguished blood.

‘That’s a grim prospect, I grant you, Viltred.’ The speaker swallowed hard as he stared at this stark picture. It hovered within a gleaming diamond hanging from the upper point of a crescent of hammered copper set before him on the table, a tongue of flame licking upwards from a candle at the bottom of the arc.

‘When did you first see this fate in your augury spell?’ He cleared his throat and looked around the homely clutter of the small cabin as if to reassure himself the vision of anguish and malice was no more than foul illusion.

‘Four days past,’ the old wizard grunted, face dour as he looked at the image of his agonised death, scant paces from his own threshold. ‘So what do you make of it, Shivvalan? What has this to do with you turning up after the mighty wizards of Hadrumal have ignored me for close on a generation, believing me to be either liar or fool? When I was Azazir’s apprentice and we made our voyage, no one believed us when we said we had found islands in the far Ocean.’ He gestured towards the gem with one gnarled hand. ‘Islands where a race of fair haired men lived, as like to these as hounds bred from the same pack. Now you come to tell me that the wise and noble wizards of Hadrumal have discovered these islands for themselves and deign to believe me at last. Is it coincidence that I now see these curs hunting me? What trouble is Planir stirring up for us all now?’ He huddled back into the worn and faded cushions that lined his heavy oak chair.

Shiv rubbed a hand over his sallow chin, dark eyes thoughtful. ‘Well, certainly the Archmage must be told at once. Believe me, Viltred, I told you the truth. Planir sent me to find out what you could recall of your own voyage to the Ice Islands with Azazir. I’m sorry, I should have explained; it seems these unknown islanders, Elietimm they call themselves, have some means of enchantment that we know nothing of in Hadrumal. Worse, they had some role to play in the fall of the Tormalin Empire, most likely by means of magic but you know how much lore was lost in the Chaos. Planir is hoping to recover some of that knowledge. We had no idea that these men would be seeking you out as well, I swear, but this must be what this means.’ He paused for a moment before continuing briskly. ‘Still, now that we have this warning, we can make sure none of this comes to pass. How often is an augury fulfilled in all its particulars? Not above one time in a handful, less maybe.’

‘I’d prefer longer odds of seeing the Solstice than four chances in five.’ Viltred drew a shuddering breath and as he did so, the vision in the crystal shook and dissolved. With evident effort to regain his composure, the old wizard leaned forward to rest his hands on the table once more and slowly turned the stone with the shimmering fingers of azure light that revealed the mage’s elemental link with the air that surrounded him. The answering amber glow rising within the heart of the gem spoke of magic born of the earth as slowly a shimmering haze cleared and new pictures focused on the bright surface.

The image sharpened; a knot of figures standing in a large airy room. Framed in an open window behind them, masts and rigging moved gently with the motion of unseen waves, sails square-set on stubby spars.

‘There you are, Viltred, and showing no signs of ill treatment.’ Shiv sighed with relief.

‘I’ll allow being caked to my eyebrows in the filth of the road and looking nigh on exhausted is preferable to dying spitted like a festival hog,’ muttered Viltred.

‘Those galleys, they’re the kind that ply the Caladhrian Gulf,’ continued Shiv thoughtfully.

‘What I want to know is who are all these other people,’ the old man snapped.

Shiv frowned as he studied the tiny figures in the spell’s vision. ‘The woman with red hair is called Livak. She travels Ensaimin, a woman of many talents, a gambler for the most part.’

‘That sounds dishonest as well as disreputable,’ snorted Viltred.

Shiv stifled a sudden smile before continuing. ‘The tall man at the back is the sworn man to Messire D’Olbriot; Ryshad, the one who should be here any day now, you recall me telling you about him?’

‘I am not yet in my dotage, I can generally remember things I have been told the same day,’ the old wizard replied acidly. ‘Who’s the plain faced piece with shoulders like a farm hand?’

‘That’s Halice,’ said Shiv slowly. ‘She’s a friend of Livak’s who’s been laid up over the last few seasons with a broken leg.’

‘And what possible reason could I have for being with such an ill assorted crew, down in Relshaz?’ demanded Viltred, his sunken eyes flashing with annoyance. ‘And before you ask, I recognise that beacon tower. I knew the city well enough in my youth.’

‘That other man’s face is weathered like sailcloth and with those rope scars on his hand, I think it’s safe to assume he’s a sailor,’ Shiv murmured, more to himself than to the old man. ‘Those parchments that Livak’s weighting with tankards would probably be charts, don’t you think? Are we taking ship somewhere? Relshaz is certainly the biggest port on the western side of the Gulf but in a city that size, a lot of other things could be going on. We could be looking to meet a ship?’

Viltred shrugged wordlessly, his lined face grim under his straggly grey brows. Shiv sat motionless at the dark oaken table, deep in thought before suddenly slapping his hands down on the scarred wood. ‘There’s no point trying to second-guess these things, is there? Still, contrasting visions like these generally mean achieving one outcome precludes the other, doesn’t it? We can make a good start down that route by getting everyone we’re seeing together and Ryshad’s already on his way.’

‘I wish you would curb your enthusiasm for telling me things I learned as a first season apprentice before you were even thought of, Shivvalan. How do you propose we go about this, anyway?’ Faint hope warred with the suspicion in the old man’s faded eyes.

‘I think I can find Halice, at very least, and I imagine she’ll know where Livak may be.’ Shiv rose from his stool and fetched a ewer from the old-fashioned dresser behind him, taking a little silver vial from his breeches’ pocket. Viltred watched in silence as the younger mage sprinkled black drops of ink on the surface of the water. A greenish glow began to gather in the water, rising above the rim of the jug to trickle over the sides to sink into the stained table top. ‘A friend of mine was helping tend her leg,’ Shiv explained in increasingly animated tones. ‘He found he had a boot buckle of hers and passed it on to me. As he said, you never know when you might want the means of scrying for someone.’ He dropped the trinket into the water, caught his lower lip between his teeth and bent closer to his magic, expression intense.

‘Just get on with it,’ muttered Viltred.

A sudden sound of rushing air and water filled the room and Shiv stood abruptly upright, his eyes meeting Viltred’s where he saw his own consternation mirrored.

‘You set wards of warning on your way here?’ asked the old man, a quake of fear in his voice. ‘Could that be this swordsman arriving?’

‘No, I’m afraid my spells are woven only for the Elieitimm,’ Shiv replied breathlessly. ‘After travelling to those accursed islands, I’ve no desire to find myself in those bastards’ hands again, believe me. One of our number suffered much the fate we have to protect you from.’

‘Let’s remove ourselves to the safety of the village,’ said Viltred more robustly. ‘You have sufficient mastery of air to achieve that?’

Shiv scowled in frustration. ‘We daren’t take the time to gather all your valuables and if we just translocate ourselves away, we’ll have no idea what the Elieitimm do or where they go.’ He swiftly crossed the dusty floor to open the varnished shutters just enough to see out. ‘We’ll be trapped like rats in a barrel if we stay here, though. No, we’ll find a vantage point in the woods where we can hide ourselves,’ he said decisively. ‘With the greater moon dark and the lesser at last crescent, this is the blackest night of the season and that can help us as much as them.’

‘If I see them coming for us, I’ll be away, clear to Hadrumal, if I can,’ warned Viltred grim faced. As the old mage rose stiffly from his chair, Shiv drew back the bolts on the sturdy

wooden door. He caught the shorter man under one arm and throwing open the door, half hurried, half carried Viltred into the concealing gloom gathering beneath the trees as the sun sank slowly in the clouded western sky.

‘Wait,’ commanded Viltred a touch breathlessly.

Shiv bent his head close to the old mage’s. ‘What is it?’

‘I’ve a few spells of my own woven hereabouts,’ Viltred murmured grimly. ‘I can set them for two footed beasts as well as those with four.’

He rubbed knuckles swollen with joint evil and a faint blue glow gathered into a ball between his hands. Viltred released it with a gesture and it floated away like a wisp of marsh gas, alighting here and there on the fringes of the forest, to leave a small, fast fading imprint on the grass.

‘We have to conceal ourselves,’ whispered Shiv urgently. ‘I’ve some means of confusing their enchantments but we have to stay absolutely motionless.’

Viltred nodded and the two wizards drew further into the shadows. A flicker of multi-hued light at the edge of seeing gathered round them, evaporating to leave the mages no more visible than the patterns of darkness merging with the twilight.

The final golden shimmers of the sun were scattered by a waterfall tumbling into a brook but everything else was muted to myriad shades of grey. Black as the night deepening under the surrounding trees, the shape of a man suddenly ran across the open ground to the hut, crouching low and moving swiftly. His yell ripped through the silence as a shock of lightning erupted from the ground beneath his feet, throwing him backwards to scramble in confusion for the shelter of the trees. Smoke drifted away on the night’s chilly breath.

After a long still moment, two more figures slowly paced across the turf to vanish in the dark lee of the hut. A sudden flare of blue light outlined the frame of a window and startled curses were hastily hushed. After a tense pause a hooded individual strode boldly from the cover of the woods and stood in the middle of the grass, a handful of others respectful in his wake.

The stout wooden door exploded inwards in a soundless shower of splinters and the black clad men rushed inside, only the faintest gleams of starlight catching on their swords and one pale, uncovered head. Faint sounds filtered through the ruins of the door, the scrape of nailed boots on the floorboards, the heavy drag of furniture being hauled aside, crashes spoke of shattering crockery while a series of dull thuds suggested treasured books being tossed angrily to the floor. One liveried figure emerged from the door, head down and stooped shoulders betraying failure and fear. The hooded man crossed the grass with impatient strides and struck the man with a gesture of disgust. The others emerged, one proffering something that stayed his leader’s punishing hand. With a sweep of his cloak, the hooded man led his troop away to melt into the forest night

The pallid, wasted arc of the lesser moon rose over the sheltering crag. Slowly tendrils of smoke began to ooze from the windows and door of the cabin. Greedy flickers of flame began to lick round the timbers, startlingly orange against the deepening night. In an impossibly short time, the roof collapsed in on itself and the red glare of the inferno defied the soft light of Halcarion’s crown of stars, now riding high and uncaring above the smoke. Feathery drifts of ash swirled across the glade as grass withered and the bare earth began to steam. Suddenly the fires melted away, leaving only a ruin of blackened wood.

A motley-coloured cat made a tentative foray from the edge of the woods but something startled it and it dashed up a tree. On its second attempt, it reached the forbidding heap of charred timbers and paced cautiously round, sniffing and occasionally prodding with an inquiring paw. After a while, a second cat appeared, ears down and tail clamped close to its grey striped side. The two animals explored the edges of the ruin for a while, the air around them shimmering oddly, the size and colours of the creatures shifting and altering until the

spell faded away to reveal the wizards in their own forms. Neither man paid any heed to the magic unravelling around them and continued to search intently, pulling wreckage aside.

‘Let me.’ Shiv hauled a blackened beam aside to reveal the smashed and burnt remnants of a trap door. Viltred pulled at a twisted tangle of wood and metal with an effort, struggling with a racking cough as the ash and cinders were puffed up around them both. Shiv helped him clear the choking debris then made to go down the rock cut stair now revealed.

‘No,’ snapped Viltred. ‘This is still my home, what is left of it.’

Gathering his faded jerkin around himself, Viltred descended the steep steps awkwardly while Shiv waited, arms folded and one impatient boot raising little flurries in the soot as it tapped.

Viltred’s cough echoed harshly as he emerged from the cellar some while later. ‘Well, the Archmage is going to learn nothing new about these mysterious islands, their vicious peoples and their arcane arts from the few treasures I won from Azazir.’ He spat into the dust and clinker. ‘They’ve taken every last piece, so where does that leave Planir’s hopes now, Shivvalan, tell me that!’