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Traitor's Knot:

Alliance of Light Volume Four

Janny Wurts

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Late Spring 5670

If feet that marched the earth to war
could count their wounds by steel,
and blood that scorched clean ground in gore
could speak in words that feel,
the cry would ring forevermore
for mercy and repeal!
– Masterbard's lament for the widows
of Dier Kenton Vale
Arithon s'Ffalenn,
Third Age Year 5652



I. Wayfarers

Inside the Kittiwake, randiest of the dock-side taverns in Shipsport, two hunted men were unlikely to find the space for anonymous privacy. Raucous sailhands and sweaty stevedores jammed every nook, accosted by swindling tricksters, and the steamy blandishments of the whores. Rumours and gossip spread faster than plague. If the venue posed risks, Dakar, the Mad Prophet, need only eavesdrop to learn that the merchant brig, *Evenstar*, had weighed anchor from Tharidor and resumed her run down the eastshore last fortnight.

'Well, what did you expect? We're a month overdue.' Fionn Areth shoved back from the trestle, chafed raw. One shout from a sailhand might see him exposed. The wide-brimmed hat just acquired from a riverman scarcely masked his striking, sharp features and black hair. The prospect of extending their journey for two hundred more leagues, over roads mired to mud by spring thaws, would but worsen his already desperate straits. 'We should be leaving. Now.'

Yet the spellbinder stayed planted in moon-calf complacency. Slumped in his uncivilized, travel-stained jerkin, a pitcher of beer tucked in hand, Dakar crossed his mud-caked boots at the ankles. His stout bulk stayed wedged between a soused party of chandlers and a tattooed longshoreman amused by two doxies, who both vied for a perch in his lap.

Their giggling raised Dakar to soulful envy. Lacking the coin to indulge his male itch, but with no dearth of copper for drinking, he tugged his snarled beard. The cinnamon strands now showed silver roots. He would soon be grey-headed. The legacy of his trials on Rockfell Peak: a harrowing entanglement in Fellowship magecraft that five brimming tankards still failed to erase from recalcitrant memory.

Already busy demolishing the sixth, Dakar swiped foam from his moustache. His jaundiced attention refused to acknowledge the anxious companion across from him.

Fionn Areth's impatience exploded. Above the tap-room's racketing noise, he let fly in his broad moorland accent, 'If *Evenstar*'s gone, then where in the name of thrice-coupling fiends do we go to seek news of your master?'

Heads turned. Laughter, dart games, and ribald conversation faltered at the teeming trestle. The Kittiwake's roisterers were always impressed by the prospect of a picked fight.

A fool's move, to draw notice, since the subject just broached involved a despised royal fugitive. The towns feared Prince Arithon of Rathain as a sorcerer who practised fell rites and dark magecraft. On suspicion, his associates were likely to burn, condemned out of hand as collaborators.

'Want to visit Sithaer's eighth hell without setting foot out of Shipsport?' Dakar gripped his tankard. He gulped down the contents, then topped up Fionn Areth's half-pint. 'Drink,' he urged, hoping the young idiot would take the safe hint and succumb to a glassy-eyed stupor. 'Trust me on this! You don't want to risk disrupting the peace. The shoreside magistrate's got a dungeon more wretched than anything you saw back in Jaelot. Spring tides flood the cells farthest down. You haven't touched misery until you've languished neck deep, with hordes of rats scrambling onto your head to save themselves from a drowning.'

'Given the untrustworthy company you keep, should I be surprised that you've sampled every Ath-forsaken gaol on the continent?' Fionn Areth shoved the filled vessel aside. 'As for Sithaer's favours, I'm not getting sotted. Keep on as you are, and your fat skin could be stewed into soup grease right where we sit!' The moorlander caught hold of Dakar's moist wrist. 'I'm using the good sense my grandame taught the goatherd. Will you haul your arse up and get out of here?'

By now, intrigued onlookers shouted for bets. Coins flashed, to the patter as someone made odds on which brawler was going

to swing first. Here at the Kittiwake, fisticuffs and mayhem were counted as prime entertainment.

'Young fool!' the fat spellbinder snarled. Now jostled as enthusiasts totted up wagers, he nursed his pitcher and, with sullen deliberation, refilled his dry tankard. 'I'll wring your neck, you dirt-stupid Araethurian, before I move even one step.' Ignoring the whores, who stopped kissing to crane, and the growl from their displeased patron, Dakar nattered on. 'Press me further, yes, beware! You'll see trouble on a scale you can't possibly imagine. Enough to make a verminous sinkhole seem blithe as a nurse-maid's picnic. Now, shut your mouth. Sit on your temper and swallow the beer set in front of you.'

'Damn you to Sithaer before I take a drop,' Fionn Areth retorted.

The rabid pack of gamblers shoved back to make space.

Dakar shut his eyes. He sucked a martyred breath. Then in one lightning move, he elbowed erect and dumped his brimming tankard over his tangled head.

The run-off doused the longshoreman, to ear-splitting shrieks from his harlots. They hiked up scarlet petticoats and fled. Their swain's irate bellow clashed with the clerks' howls and rattled soot from the Kittiwake's rafters.

Dakar freed his captive arm. While the trestle skidded, upsetting the pitcher and smashing two lightermen's dinner plates, he skinned through the clerks' snatching grasp and used his tankard to parry the stevedore's battering fist.

Crockery smashed. Fragments pelted over the dicers crammed elbow to elbow on the seat just behind.

Yelling murder, and unnaturally quick for a stout man grown tight on the Kittiwake's twopenny brew, Dakar ducked a dockwalloper's left hook. Then he lost his balance and sat. The brute's knuckles hammered into the clerks' outraged charge. The leading one crashed with a bloodied jaw, and flattened two of his fellows. Their thrashing upset the adjacent trestle. Bowls and hot chowder went flying. The four brawny fishermen deprived of their meal unsheathed flensing knives, screamed, and plunged in. Their vacated bench upset with a bang, toppling a drunk, who bowled into a circle of overdressed merchants. Lace tore; spilled food and spirits rained over fine velvets. The outraged peacocks redoubled the noise, bewailing their despoiled finery.

Trapped in the breach, Fionn Areth clambered upright.

Disaster overtook him. Bedlam exploded like froth on a pot, and the Kittiwake's tap-room erupted.

Tankards sailed. Broth splashed. Elbows and fists smacked against heaving flesh. Beneath the soaked tits of a gilded figure-head, an agile pack of sailhands laid into their neighbours with marlinspikes, knuckle-bones, and clogs. Their sally encountered the longshoreman's kin, who had levelled a trestle for use as a ram. Card games whisked air-borne. Stew bones and cutlery showered the brick floor, stabbing toes and tripping combat-ants. Three prostitutes scuttling for cover went down, then another man, who became mired in their skirts. Their squeals drew the lusty eye of a galley-man, who dived in to lay claim to the spoils. While the landlord at the tap screeched threats and imprecations, the three heavies the Kittiwake employed to toss drunks at last stirred themselves to take charge. Brandishing cudgels, they waded in, dropping bodies like beef at a knacker's.

By then, Dakar had vanished, swallowed into the battering press.

Fionn Areth found himself trapped, all alone, mashed against the rocked edge of the trestle. The burgeoning riot cut off his escape, a rip tide that raged without quarter. The Kittiwake's brawlers were a Shipsport legend, vicious with drink and seething with the age-old bad blood between galley-men and blue-water sailors. Crews seized on the chance to hammer their rivals. Enraged coopers shied bottles at all comers, while a reeling topman snatched lit candles from the sconces and flung them at random targets. Sparks flurried and ignited a puddle of spirits. Beset by fire and windmilling fists, the Kittiwake's strong-men yelled to summon reinforcements. The cooks, the pot-boys, and two muscled butchers burst out of the kitchen, armed with bludgeons and cleavers. Their vengeful flying wedge suggested an experience well primed for this afternoon's frolic.

At risk of being crippled, or knocked senseless for arrest, Fionn Areth grabbed the rolling pitcher as a weapon. But the body he slugged was a knife-bearing rigger, who whirled around, swore, and accosted him. His sally was backed by his ship's bursar, and another sailor swinging a belaying pin.

Fionn Areth fell back on sword training, ducked the club, and used a guarding forearm to parry the wrist of the dirk-wielding assailant. The slash missed his gut and deflected upwards, the follow-through skewered his hat brim. He snatched, too late. The

snagged felt whisked away. Bare-headed, and wearing the flawless, spelled features of a notorious criminal, the moorlander panicked.

His last feckless brawl had sent him to a scaffold, mistakenly condemned as a sorcerer. A blade through the heart, followed by fire would give the most stalwart man nightmares.

Haunted by dread since that narrow escape, Fionn Areth ducked in blind terror. He dodged the swift stab of a marlinspike, desperate. Unless he recovered the hat, now impaled on the point of a maniac's dagger, he risked being falsely arraigned once again as the most wanted felon on the continent.

No one would believe the fact he was innocent. The uncanny likeness he wore was too real, a permanent imprint aligned by the wiles of the Koriani enchantresses. They had altered his face, then played him as bait. Their crafting was seamless: even his mother presumed the change was no less than his natural birthright. His late capture in Jaelot might have seen him dead for the deeds of his look-alike nemesis.

Arithon Teir's'Ffalenn, known as Spinner of Darkness, was too well renowned for obscurity. His horrific record of wanton destruction had dispatched fifty thousand armed men, sworn to serve the Alliance of Light.

'Furies take Dakar for a witless wastrel!' Fionn Areth gasped, sorely beset. Both marlinspike and dagger thrust in concert to maim him. He dodged the first, caught a gash on his forearm. His dive for the hat ran afoul of the brute with the cudgel dispatched to clear out the tap-room.

Fionn Areth crumpled, glassy-eyed and raging, into the dark of unconsciousness.

Roused by the throb of the bruise on his head and the stinging slice on his forearm, Fionn Areth groaned, limp and queasy with vertigo. Spinning senses revealed a small, panelled chamber, lit by a clouded casement. The fusty air smelled of ink and hot wax, while an old man's voice stitched through his fogged thoughts, gravid with accusation.

'. . . same pair wrecked the Kittiwake's tap-room before, in the company of a known smuggler.'

Someone unseen cleared his throat and replied in the sonorous drone of state language.

While the debate sawed onwards over Fionn Areth's head, he absorbed the fact that he slumped face-down, cheek pressed to a battered table. Iron manacles circled his wrists, which were

draped like dropped meat on his knees. Somewhere nearby, a quill-nib scraped.

He tried to sit up. The effort spiked fresh pain through his skull, jogging the memory of terror. Where else could he be but in a magistrate's custody? His despair was confirmed by the crack of a gavel, then a man's bitten phrase, that the miscreants' infractions were anything but a moot point.

While Fionn Areth mustered the shaken breath to assert his abused state of innocence, Dakar's unctuous speech intervened.

'Captain Dhirken passed the Wheel years before you took office. Lord Magistrate, the past charge was not left outstanding. Yes, her crew wrecked the Kittiwake. But the damages were settled in full at the time, paid off by the singer responsible.'

Fionn Areth shut his eyes. *This was Shipsport, not Jaelot*. His panic still haunted with visceral force. The nightmare repeat of prisoner's chains *could not* be happening again. Through rising nausea, he tried to protest. 'But I wasn't th –'

A kick rapped his ankle. He gasped and shoved straight, snatched the swimming impression of a vaulted ceiling above a railed dais. There, a number of corpulent, robed men sat arrayed in stern judgement against him.

'Shut up, you fool!' Dakar hissed in his ear. 'Handle this wrong, and we're dog-meat.' To Shipsport's gathered tribunal, he temporized, 'This time, to our sorrow, we haven't the coin to pay fines for disorderly conduct. We can't make amends to the Kittiwake's landlord, beyond our respectful apologies.'

'Well, sorry's no recompense!' The stout table jounced as the tavern's greybeard owner thumped an indignant fist. 'I've suffered enough of your hot air already to bore me past Daelion's Wheel! The last time, your friend played his lyranthe for hand-outs. He sang, forbye, like a silver-tongued lark! Caroled until every last mark cleaned his pockets, and bedamned to your pleas that you're penniless.' To the magistrate rapping his gavel, he railed, 'My tap-room's in shambles! My son broke his arm. I demand satisfaction. Grant the Kittiwake use of the bard's talent for one month. The house takes his proceeds until the debt's paid, with the extra for punitive damages.'

The town clerk waggled his pen in remonstrance. 'The accused in the dock broke the peace, don't forget! Shipsport's coffers are

due a steep fine for their act of civil disturbance. These charges must be met beforetime.'

While the magistrate stroked his suet chin, and the spring's nesting wrens cheeped in the eaves outside, Fionn Areth stirred to a sour clank of chain. 'But I don't –'

Dakar jammed an elbow into his ribs, then spun lies with pressured invention. 'The bard has a head cold. Can't sing a note. Force him to try, his sick croaking is likely to rile your patrons past salvage. You said yourself, the Kittiwake's crowd likes to toss inept singers through the window. That won't meet your fees, and my friend lies at risk of suffering a crippling injury.'

Truth and impasse; the magistrate smothered a yawn. The victimized landlord glowered, arms folded, while the clerk licked his thumb and flattened a clean sheet of parchment. 'Hard labour, then? Incarceration? Public whipping? The brawling was started without provocation.' He tapped the scroll bearing the transcribed statement. 'Disrupting the peace calls for a harsh sentence.'

Shipsport's magistrate laced his prim knuckles and delivered the final verdict. 'The accused have no money. Therefore, the bard will perform until the debts to the town and the tavern are discharged.' He silenced objection with the superior glare he reserved for the low-class condemned. 'No reprieve!'

'I won't sing for any man!' yelled Fionn Areth, a mistake: his broad grass-lands vowels displayed no congestion. 'Not for a penny, not for struck gold, and not ever for settling damages over a riot that I didn't start!'

The Kittiwake's landlord stared down his beak nose. 'Upright men don't keep the company of smugglers.'

Since such shiftless character was the s'Ffalenn bastard's legacy, the slung mud was going to stick. By luck alone, none of Shipsport's officials connected today's face with the infamous Master of Shadow. Draw undue attention, and some sharp-eyed busybody might come forward to point out the oversight.

Fionn Areth slumped in the prisoner's dock, cowed by his fear as the steps of due process saddled him with the arraignment.

Experience taught him the futility of argument. His just plea would only fall on deaf ears and earn him a savage beating.

'You dare the impertinence of claiming to refuse?' The magistrate flicked a glance toward his clerk, then granted the case his sharp quittance. 'Call back the guards to remove the offenders. Lock them in the dungeon on bread crusts and water till the singer sees fit to change heart.'

The dungeon in Shipsport outmatched even Dakar's revolting description. Flood-tide clogged the drains with green slime, coating the floor with decomposing shell-fish, strained through the wracked straw and stranded kelp. Fionn Areth gagged on the nauseous stench. Too miserable to curse the rough handling of the wardens who hauled him into confinement, he sagged as they bolted his manacles to a chain spiked in the sweating stonewall.

Head tipped forward, shoulders hunched to avoid the damp masonry chilling his back, the Araethurian squeezed his eyes shut. The pound of his pulse split his skull to white agony. To make matters worse, the Mad Prophet had burst into a fit of inebriated singing. The cell had an arched ceiling. Within closed confines, his racket raised echoes fit to drive the dead to screaming torment.

Oblivious, Dakar belted on through a ballad expounding the exploits of two whores, a blind cobbler, and a goat. Cuffs from the guards failed to silence his noise. Dakar grunted, undaunted, through his tone-deaf rendition of the repetitive chorus.

'He's sloshed to the gills on the Kittiwake's rotgut,' the long-faced turnkey observed. Anxious to leave, he jangled his keys. 'If you bash him unconscious, he'll just wake back up. I say, let him bide. Locked in without recourse, his wretched companion is going to be driven insane. He'll either pay up the charged fine for relief, or he'll kick the brute's bollocks clear through his throat. If such doesn't kill him, the mutton-head jape won't be left in a fit state to breed.'

Dakar widened his brown eyes, unfazed. Limp as a roped walrus in the hands of the guards, he forced them to tow him up to the ring to fasten his prisoner's shackles. As they wrestled the bolts, puffing vile curses, his chained posture proved no deterrent. Dakar followed the ballad with warbled, scurrilous doggerel extolling the virtues of gin.

'That's it!' snapped the turnkey, ears plugged with his thumbs. 'The tide floods apace. Tarry much longer, and we'll have wet boots.' He fidgeted until the last guardsman filed out, then clashed the grille shut on the miscreants. His

malicious grin flashed by the glare of held torch-light as he secured the rusty lock. 'Enjoy the Lord Magistrate's sweet hospitality!'

The squelching tread of officialdom retreated, plunging the cell into darkness.

Fionn Areth stifled his impulse to shout. The icy air settled like a batt of inky wool once the upstairs portal banged closed. The reek of sea rot and urine overpowered, as the flow of fresh air was cut off.

A large insect scuttled over the Araethurian's scraped wrist. His jerk of revulsion clanged the fixed chain, and his curse snatched the break between choruses. 'May the furies of Sithaer's eighth hell plague the day that your dam spread her knees and gave birth!'

Through the hitched pause to recover his breath, Dakar chuckled. 'You might as well sing along with me, bumpkin. Stay cheerful, you won't have to think overmuch, or listen to the skittering wild life.'

'Damn you for a sot!' Fionn Areth lashed back. 'Without your loose habits, we wouldn't be dangled like carrion, nose to nose with the starveling rats.'

'Ho!' Dakar whooped. 'Starveling rats! That's poetic.' Buoyed to euphoria by the Kittiwake's ale, he nudged his companion's ankle. 'Know this one, do you?' He plunged into another obscene recitation, at a pitch fit to mangle the ear-drums.

'Shut up!' Fionn Areth kicked back, cleanly missed, and clunked his head against the wall with a yelp of anguished frustration. 'Just how are we to get out of this fix? They think I'm Athera's Masterbard! In truth, I don't sing any better than you. If you're going to insist that we work off our fine that way, the Kittiwake's roughnecks might as well batter us straight to perdition right now. Better I give my consent to such madness, before we pickle in this cesspit, drowning in rat crap and sea-water.'

'Well, practise a bit first.' Dakar hiccoughed in brosy hilarity. 'Might as well test your talent before we're marched out to get diced by a mob of drunken sailhands.'

'You should care, numbed as a dolt on cheap beer,' Fionn Areth cut back in ripe sarcasm.

'Actually, I'm not,' Dakar confessed, his blurred whisper nearly lost in the darkness. 'For the record, at least, I'm uselessly pissed until after the tide-water rises.' Louder, he added, 'Sing, damn your hide. Howl like a monkey, or warble

in counterpoint. If you don't, the pesky warden might decide to withhold our ration of bread crusts. The last thing we need is some ham-handed grunt trying to drag us back upstairs beforetime.'

'What!' Fionn Areth jerked his sore wrists in a bale-fire flash of amazement. 'Refuse the chance to get out of this place? You're off your head! Gone moonstruck, and truly.'

'Skin-tight on beer, but not crazy,' Dakar insisted with owlish gravity. 'I thought, since we're here, you should savour the experience. The odd, swimming varmint who might perch on your head will be offered the gift of survival. Far more than a rat might see benefits.'

Past hope of holding a sane conversation, Fionn Areth lapsed into stiff silence. Besotted whimsy could not reverse the gravity of his current quandary. He felt no pity for the doomed rats, though the shut door blocked their way to the stairwell. Not as long as he languished in chains, bearing a criminal sorcerer's features.

Dakar was no use. Unfazed by the threat, he filled his lungs and resumed bawling sing-song nonsense. The cold grew no less. The stink stayed oppressive. The herder from Araethura cursed the short length of the chain, which would not let him clasp his hands to his aching head. While he sat, chewing over his circling fears, the news from upcoast moved apace: word already spread, that the Master of Shadow had escaped from the Mayor of Jaelot's close custody. The men-at-arms dispatched in his pursuit had been lured over the Skyshiel Ranges and into the wilds of Daon Ramon Barrens.

In darkness, the graphic accounts spurred fresh terror: of town-born blood spilled by savage design; eye-witness tales of shadows and haunts bringing death on the Baiyen causeway; of men lulled to sleep by the singing of stones and frozen to glass under moonlight. Everywhere, Arithon's name inspired fear. If Dakar gave short shrift to the doctrine that claimed Rathain's prince was a demon, today's episode of manic debauchery destroyed the last foothold for trust.

Fionn Areth snarled a frustrated oath. Although Arithon Teir's'Ffalenn had risked capture to spare him from the horror of Jaelot's scaffold, the Mad Prophet's assertion the deed sprang from sound character only made the surrounding facts seem the more ominous. Today's truth spoke too loudly: when the passes reopened, no more wearied men straggled in upon starving, lamed horses.

The first hardy caravan to descend from Eastwall had described the emergency muster at Darkling. Bloodshed had dogged Arithon's heels at each step. By command of Avenor's high priesthood, Alliance troops had unfurled the sunwheel banner and marched upon Daon Ramon. They had not embarked on the campaign alone. At Narms, no less than Lysaer himself had gathered a veteran company. His cry to arms also raised the standing troops trained by his steward at Etarra. Both forces had converged on the snow-clad barrens, to wage the Light's war against Shadow.

Until breaking ice reopened the northcoast, and the trade galleys hove in from the west, the eastshore towns held their uneasy breath, as yet unaware that a crushing defeat had shattered Lysaer's combined host.

Licked by the trickle of rising water, young Fionn Areth had no choice but to hang his trapped fate on a prayer. 'Merciful maker, let the ice hold the north passage closed for a while longer.'

A trained seer, Dakar knew the Spinner of Darkness had survived the Alliance assault. He would not divulge his liege's location. That sore point piqued Fionn Areth's suspicion and tightened his queasy stomach. No platitude eased him. Not since the hour the Mad Prophet broke his last scrying, stunned into unyielding silence. He refused to speak of Prince Arithon's plight, even sunk in his cups at the Kittiwake. Desperately determined to carol himself hoarse, perhaps needing to smother the nag of his conscience, Dakar stayed deaf. He would not acknowledge the scope of his peril, allied to the Master of Shadow.

A goatherd who lacked arcane talent could do nothing but thrash out his worries alone.

An hour passed; two. The well of the tide crept across the stone floor. The kiss of cold water seeped through dry clothes, then like slow agony, deepened. Soon the pool lapped at Fionn Areth's tucked ankles. The flood stirred the vermin, who quested forth upon tentative, pattering feet. Every fraught effort to kick them away brought him vengeful nips from sharp teeth. The misery mounted. Dakar's filthy stanzas had devolved to gibberish, touched here and there by the oddly placed line, lilted in cadenced Paravian.

Distempered and ill, Fionn Areth lost patience. Curses did not stop the rodents that clambered over his shivering skin. The sea rose, inexorable. Soon immersed to the waist, he fought chattering teeth, while the scrabbling rats became frantic.

'Fiends plague you, Dakar!' Fionn Areth jerked his chin left and right, but failed to dislodge the wet creatures that nosed at

his ears. 'Can't you shut your mouth? Maybe fashion a baneward. Anything to send these fell pests to oblivion!'

Yet the rats' splashing struggles and shrill squeals could not dampen the madman's racketing choruses. He sang without letup, each quavering line of botched metre an insult that mangled intelligence.

'"*Oh the sun brings us cherries, then ripe red berries,*
oat sprouts make malt whisky, while the barley king whispers,
Praise for the bees and the willow trees,
Seed for the birds and grass for the herds,
Sweet grapes love spring rain, t'an li'arient, *Lu-haine!*"'

The emphasis set on the name at the end served Fionn Areth scant warning. The closed cell became charged. Hair rose at his nape, while his skin puckered into sharp gooseflesh. Not being chained, the rats squeaked and bolted. They splashed helter-skelter in panic. A knifing breeze that moaned down the stairwell, the discorporate Sorcerer drawn by Dakar's summons, arrived with the force of a silenced thunder-clap.

If darkness still reigned, its texture had changed, filled by that ineffable presence.

Fionn Areth recoiled. He wished to be *anyplace else in Athera*. The affray with the Mistwraith's prison at Rockfell had shown him the reach of Luhaine and the Fellowship's power.

'Wards!' Dakar pealed in jagged hysteria. 'Set them now! Koriani enchantresses are seeking the goatherd, and I can't stand them off any longer!'

'Done,' Luhaine answered, mercifully brief.

Fionn Areth shut his eyes, braced for a blast of scouring light, or a purging release of wild energies.

Nothing happened.

The slosh of salt water did not abate. Apprehensive, the Araethurian cracked open one lid. Stillness remained, laced by a nexus of withering, cold air and a living awareness not to be gainsaid.

'Rats,' Luhaine qualified. 'They gave their consent and carried the spells to lay down my guarding circle.' Fixated on Fionn's repressed jerk of startlement, he bristled, 'What did you expect, goatherd? A flare of crude conjury? Such a beacon would have been grossly misplaced where the utmost of finesse is needful.'

'What enchantresses? Where?' Fionn Areth accused. 'I saw no

women but shameless harlots when Dakar's lunacy rousted the Kittiwake.'

'Be quiet, Fionn! Koriani spell-craft was the reason I tipped the damned beer on my head in the first place.' To the Sorcerer, not drunken, the Mad Prophet said, 'Then you knew the accursed witches were after him?' His slurred speech in fact the sapped mark of exhaustion, he complained, 'For my pains, then you might have come a bit sooner.'

'Your goatherd is not a blood prince of the realm,' Luhaine pointed out, miffed. 'To strike a clean balance, you did have to ask. Even then, my act stands on tenuous ground. I could not defend, but for Arithon's ill-advised pledge to spare a crown subject from injustice.' Met by Dakar's crest-fallen silence, the shade of the Sorcerer tempered his censure. 'Though you need not have waited for use of salt water to mask your cry of intent.'

The Mad Prophet's sigh echoed off dripping stonework. 'Well, you're scarcely the sort to choose congress with rats.' Chain clanked as he shifted, trying to ease the strain on his manacled wrists. 'Last I saw, Luhaine, you hated their ornery nature worse than the plague.'

'I don't enjoy rats,' the Sorcerer admitted. 'Although Koriathain please my sensibilities far less, our Fellowship is critically short-handed. Next time you cry out for help in a crisis, we may not be able to answer.'

'What's to be done, then?' Dakar appealed, wracked by his galling frustration. 'Shipsport's dungeon can't keep us protected.' He need not press his point: once the brutal news of the Alliance's losses travelled the eastshore trade routes, Fionn Areth's unnatural resemblance to Arithon would turn into a red-hot liability. 'We've missed our planned rendezvous. *Evenstar*'s already weighed anchor and sailed on her scheduled run south.'

Luhaine subsided to stilled cogitation, as much to measure the rigid distress behind Fionn Areth's stark quiet. 'You'll have to change plans. A sea berth's unwise.'

Fresh off the docks, even the back-country goatherd was forced to the same grim assessment. Every ship bearing flags of town registry flew the gold sunwheel of the Alliance. Aboard such a vessel, amid Arithon's pledged enemies, the young double could all too easily find himself hung from the mainmast yard-arm. Yet lacking the natural defence of salt water, a spellbinder's skills risked being outmatched by the quartz-driven snares unleashed by the Koriani Order. Until the pair reached warded walls at

Alestron, Fionn Areth's contested freedom was bound to remain under constant siege.

Begrudging the ice-water freezing his bollocks, and ambivalent toward the powers of sorcery, the beleaguered herder buried his fears behind his uncivil suspicion. 'You'd rather we came to grief on the road?'

Luhaine had the grace not to rise to offence, though the chill in his silence rippled the brine, and the Mad Prophet hissed through his teeth.

'I don't like rats, either,' Fionn Areth lashed back, tired of being a bone in the jaws of a deadlocked political conflict.

The stillness stretched, filled by the slosh of the tide. The Sorcerer's presence stayed, a poised force welded into obsidian air. The truth kept its cruel edges: Arithon Teir's'Ffalenn would never have been forced into flight through Daon Ramon, if not for Fionn Areth's obstinate wish to align with Lysaer's Alliance. The Light's war host would have had no hazed fugitive to chase and no fresh round of slaughter to lay at the feet of the man they called Spinner of Darkness.

Justly reviled by the uncanny weight of the Fellowship Sorcerer's displeasure, the Araethurian flushed with embarrassment. No use to lie, or to pretend his deliverance by Arithon's hand had not torn his youthful ideals to raw wounds and conflicted loyalty.

Thrown out of his depth, Fionn Areth clung yet to his obdurate, grass-lands honesty. He dared not rely on the spellbinder's word or place trust in the doings of Sorcerers. The s'Ffalenn prince himself had yet to account for the criminal charges against him. Until guilt or innocence could be resolved, Luhaine must respect the unquiet fact: that the straightforward cut of country-bred cloth could not reconcile a stance that had plotted a cold-blooded massacre.

Though he drowned, gnawed by vermin, Fionn Areth would as soon run his steel through Prince Arithon's heart. While he lived and breathed, he would not embrace the dread choice of abetting dark magecraft.

'Boy, you grant me no opening to respond,' Luhaine pronounced at due length. 'Your grounds for safe conduct must still rely on the oath Dakar swore to appease his Grace of Rathain. Remain in the spellbinder's company, and the shield of crown justice will provide you with shelter. Leave, and all ties become forfeit.'

'I can't stand down the Koriani Prime Matriarch alone,' Dakar appealed in trepidation. 'My defence wards won't hold. The

instant the tide ebbs, we'll be stripped and hung by our heels like a brace of skinned rabbits.'

Luhaine's leashed presence revolved, unperturbed. 'Then you'll have no choice but to show their trained scryers precisely what they expect.'

'Cast me off in surrender?' Fionn Areth cried, shocked. 'Your crown prince risked death, first!' Despite his ambivalence, the meddling Koriathain had wrought the bane that unravelled his destiny in the first place.

'Fionn, be quiet! You won't be betrayed.' Too short and fat for his tether of chain, Dakar wrestled the pain of wracked joints, and pursued harried converse with Luhaine. 'Yes, my fit of erratic behaviour disrupted their spelled sweep of the Kittiwake's tap-room. But now we owe fines. We can't lose their probes by seeding a wild rash of bar brawls. What do you actually suggest?'

'Give them the whoring wastrel.' Luhaine's pause carried a poison simplicity. 'Would any celibate circle of women, rigidly scrutinized by their seniormost peers, play the role of voyeur to keep pace with unsavoury company?'

'Sithaer's coupling fiends!' Dakar gasped, half-strangled. 'Oh, please, let them try!' The order's initiates were female, after all, with most of them blushing virgins. The calm state their scryers required for trance could scarcely withstand the raw onslaught of vice, with its bestial range of sensation. The spellbinder whooped, his eyes leaking tears. 'You know, I could wreck those prim ladies through drink!'

Quartz crystal would magnify his drunken stupor. Even an experienced circle must falter, hazed out of focus as their snooping seeresses threaded their watch sigils through him.

'Give them debauchery,' Luhaine agreed. 'Who would waste breath to comment? For you, rank indulgence is not out of character. The distortions such excess will spin through your aura can be made to mask my wrought binding to shield Fionn Areth.'

'Well, you'd better not fail me,' the Mad Prophet said, tart. 'Wasting hangovers hurt, not to mention, my access to conjury is going to get pissed straight to shambles.' Undone that way, he would be incapable of even the small cantrips to cure his myopic eyesight.

Luhaine stayed unmoved. 'The stakes could go far worse for your charge, if Prime Selidie learns that you've balked her will by asking for Fellowship backing.'

'I'll bang myself witless,' Dakar said point-blank. Before Fionn drew breath, he doused the inevitable protest. 'The witches had you swear an oath of permission over the Skyron aquamarine. That tie has kept you in peril since the moment Prince Arithon snatched you from Jaelot. The Koriani hold on your life might turn out to be revocable. If so, you'll need the trained help of an embodied Fellowship Sorcerer. Or else find your way to a Brotherhood hostel, and risk the chance you can beg Ath's adepts to call down a divine intercession.'

'If, indeed, they would extend such relief,' Luhaine temporized, 'and provided you arrived with your freedom intact to ask for the grace of their sanctuary.' The nearest such haven lay too far removed from Dakar's planned route to Alestron. 'Very few supplicants who petition receive the fruits of exalted, wise counsel.' The Sorcerer gave that faint hope his crisp closure. 'You can't sustain such a pilgrimage, herder. None pass the threshold to enjoin the high mysteries who walk with an unsettled heart.'

'Should I argue mixed feelings?' Fionn Areth attacked. 'By Alliance tenets *which might pose the truth*, your Fellowship's practice is tainted. The Light's doctrine also holds that Ath's Brotherhood is corrupt, suborned by the powers of Darkness.'

Luhaine's presence recoiled.

'Forgive backlands ignorance!' the Mad Prophet cried. 'Leave Rathain's crown prince his preferred right to answer this.'

Yet Fionn Areth lashed out, goaded on to brash fury. 'I don't need –'

'Shut up, you dolt! The bright powers of Athera are not Lysaer's enemies, no matter who taught you to fear them.' Dakar leaned forward, jerked breathless as his manacled wrists wrenched him short. 'Luhaine, for pity! Respect the constraints of my bond to Prince Arithon.' The spellbinder's appeal gained a frantic, shrill edge, as the hair on his skin stabbed erect. 'You know the young fool has a vicious tongue, and no semblance of manners when he's been terrified.'

'An apology would be civil,' the Sorcerer snapped, vexed. 'If the cant of Avenor's false priesthood held truth, your yokel would no longer be using the blameless air to support his ungrateful opinions!'

'For Arithon's sake, don't deny him your help,' Dakar begged with strained dignity.

'Help?' Luhaine huffed. 'I'd sooner converse with a Sanpashir

scorpion. At least they don't sting before they are threatened, and they are soft-spoken and gracious.'

'Once, I was the hare-brained scapegrace,' Dakar entreated. Warned that his charge might open his mouth, he dispatched a kick, underwater. 'Luhaine, for pity! Grant me the favour. The delay from your summons to Rockfell Peak is what cost us our safe passage on *Evenstar*.'

'There are limits.' Yet the missed rendezvous with the brig scored a point that could not be dismissed. For the harrowing service just given to spare his strapped Fellowship from a crisis, the Sorcerer chose to unbend. 'I can't ease the constraints,' he admitted, begrudging. 'Technicalities cloud your present awareness. Fionn Areth bears a life debt, acquired at birth. Elaira yielded that tie under oath-bound duress to the power of the Koriani Council. Her retraction might free him, with Asandir's backing. But at present, your lump-headed moorlander can't ask that choice, or be traumatized by any-one's act of grand conjury.'

Though the cresting tide surged through the cell in black currents and immersed the chained prisoners chest-deep, Luhaine's summary cancelled the needful alternative. 'My colleague cannot spare the resource, just now. Nor have I the leeway to chase after an ingrate stripling as nurse-maid. You'll have my warding as far as Alestron. From there, take to sea aboard *Khetienn* forthwith. Wring what refuge you can from blue water.'

To the bumpkin, inflamed by his feckless ideals and his suicidal confusion, Luhaine discharged his last word. 'Dakar must escort you to safety himself. The wards that will hide you are spun through *his* aura. By your will, mark my warning particulars carefully! I can't grant you a guarded shred of autonomy under my Fellowship's auspices. Woe betide you if you should ever stray from the side of your oathsworn protector.'

'Luhaine, wait!' Teeth chattering, Dakar shouted to stem the rushed breeze of the Sorcerer's departure. 'What of the fee imposed by the Kittiwake? Hold back! Shipsport has passed sentence, and we haven't the coin to defray the clerk's fine or meet the landlord's exorbitant damages.'

'You do now,' corrected the Sorcerer's shade, his fading voice thinned to asperity. 'The magistrate's clerk will find an entry that states the fine's paid in full in the morning. Farewell!'

The chained prisoners were abandoned to hollow darkness,

scored through by the lap of salt water and the resurgent chittering of swimming rats.

'Is he gone?' Fionn ventured, his rage drained away to threadbare exhaustion.

Dakar cursed in spectacular, rough language until he ran short of breath. 'Yes, Luhaine has left us. Bad cess to your yapping grass-lands insolence! Now we get to soak through a miserable night. Don't try another damned *word* or believe this! I'll leave your scared arse as chained bait for the witches and watch Shipsport's vermin feed on your carcass!'