

OATHBREAKERS

BOOK II: VOWS AND HONOR
MERCEDES LACKEY

DAW BOOKS, INC.
DONALD A. WOLLHEIM, FOUNDER

375 Hudson Street, New York, NY 10014

ELIZABETH R. WOLLHEIM
SHEILA E. GILBERT
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Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[One](#)

[Two](#)

[Three](#)

[Four](#)

[Five](#)

[Six](#)

[Seven](#)

[Eight](#)

[Nine](#)

[Ten](#)

[Eleven](#)

[Twelve](#)

[Appendix One - Dictionary of Shin'a'in Terms](#)

[Appendix Two - Songs and Poems](#)

THIS COULD NOT BE HAPPENING!

But it was. A spirit-Kal'enedral was manifesting before Tarma's and Kethry's astonished eyes, spirit which was violating every precept to appear.

He seemed to be fighting against something; his form wavered in and out of visibility as he held out frantic, empty hands to her, and he seemed to be laboring to speak. Kethry saw with mage-sight the veil of sickly white power that was encasing the spirit like a filthy web, keeping him from full manifestation.

"There's—Goddess, there's a counterspell—" Kethry started out of her entrancement. "It's preventing *any* magic from entering this room! He can't manifest! I—I have to break it, or—"

"Don't!" Tarma hissed. "You break a counterspell and they'll *know* one of us is a mage!"

Tarma turned back to the spirit to see that he had given up the effort to speak—and she saw that his hands were moving. "Keth—his hands—"

As Kethry's eyes were again drawn to the wavering figure, Tarma read his message. *Death-danger* she read, and *assassins*....

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DAW Book Collectors No. 768.

eISBN : 978-1-101-12789-6

First Printing, January



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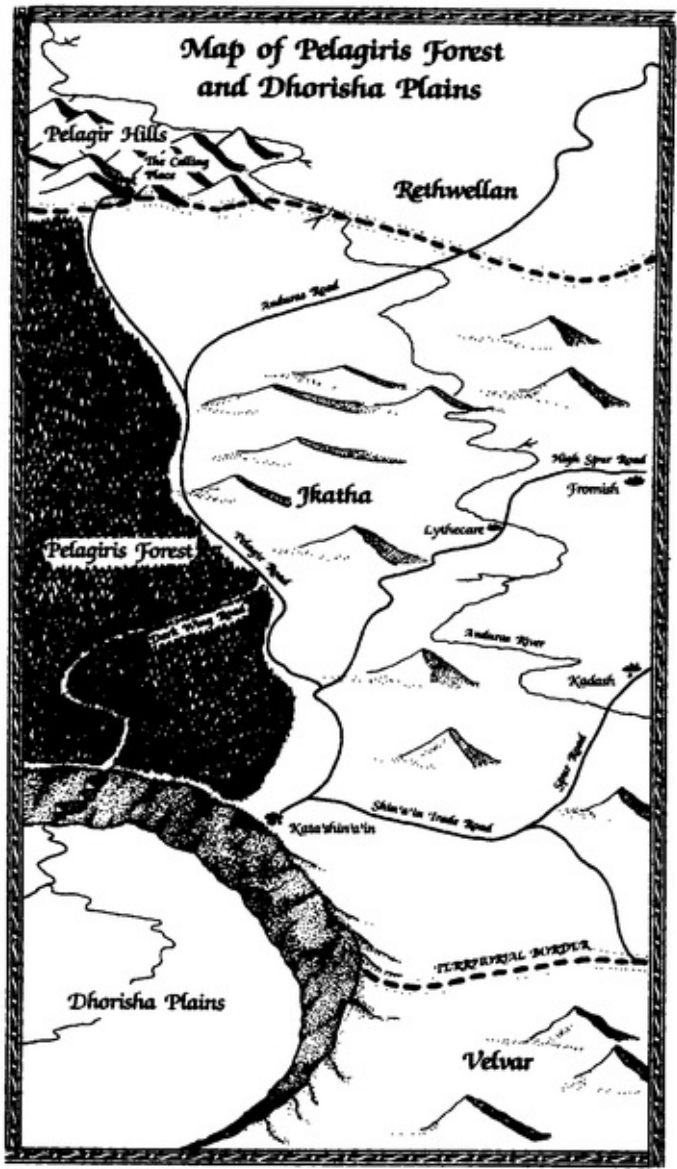
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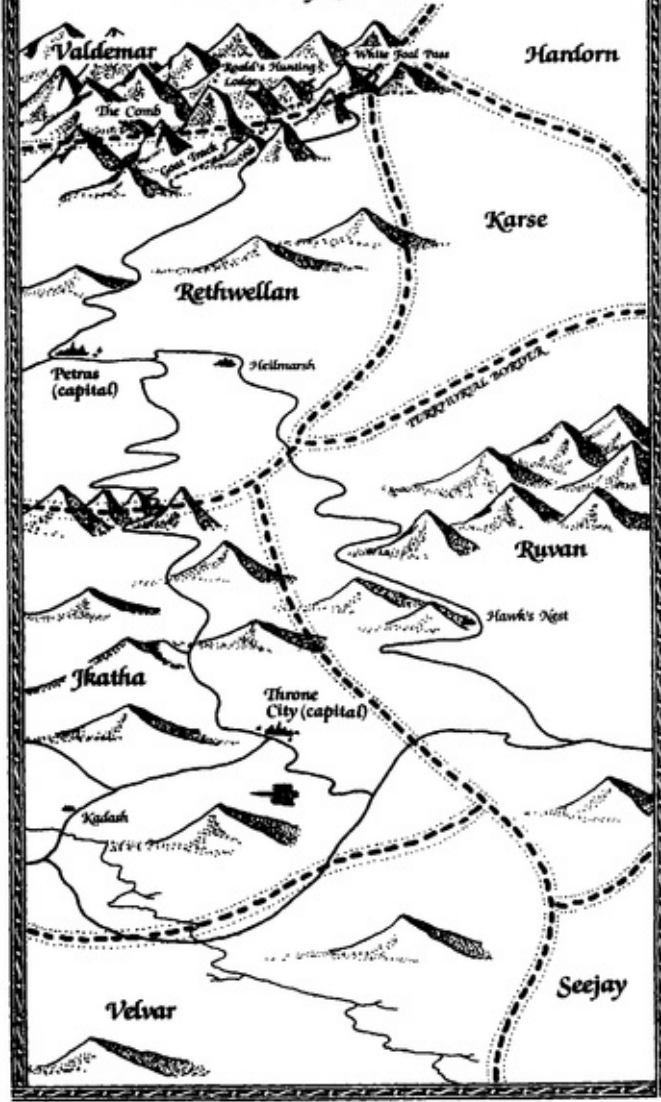
Dedicated to:
Betsy, Don and Elsie

The *real* magic-makers

Thanks, folks.



Overview of Six Countries



One

It was a dark and stormy night...

:Pah!: Warrl said with disgust so thick Tarma could taste it. *:Must you even think in cliches?:*

Tarma took her bearings during another flash of lightning, tried and failed to make out Warrl's shaggy bulk against watery blackness, then thought back at him, *Well it is, damnit!*

Tarma shena Tale'sedrin, who was Shin'a'in nomad, Kal'enedral (or, to outClansmen, a "Swornsworn"), and most currently Scoutmaster for the mercenary company called "Idra's Sunhawks" was *not* particularly happy at this moment. She was sleet-drenched, cold and numb, and mired to her armpits; as was her companion, the lupine *kyree* Warrl. The Sunhawks' camp was black as the inside of a box at midnight, for all it was scarcely an hour past sunset. Her hair was plastered flat to her skull, and trickles of icy water kept running into her eyes. She couldn't even feel the ends of her fingers anymore. Her feet hurt, her joints ached, her nose felt so frozen it was like to fall off, and her teeth were chattering hard enough to splinter. She was not pleased, having to stumble around in the dark and freezing rain to find the tent she shared with her partner and oathbound sister, the White Winds sorceress, Kethry.

The camp was dark out of necessity; even in a downpour sheltered fires would normally burn in the firepits in front of each tent, or a slow-burning torch would be staked out in the lee of every fourth, but that was impossible tonight. You simply couldn't keep a fire lit when the wind howled at you from directions that changed moment by moment, driving the rain before it; and torches under canvas were a danger even the most foolhardy would forgo. A few of the Sunhawks had lanterns or candles going in their tents; but the weather was foul enough that most preferred to go straight to sleep when not on duty. It was too plaguey cold and wet to be sociable. For heat, most stuck to the tiny charcoal braziers Idra had insisted they each pack at the beginning of this campaign. The Sunhawks had known the Captain too well to argue about (what had seemed at the time) a silly burden; now they were grateful for her foresight.

But with the rain coming down first in cascades, then in *waterwalls*, Tarma couldn't see the faint glow of candles or lanterns shining through the canvas walls that would have told her where the tents were. So she slogged her way through the camp mostly by memory and was herself grateful to Idra for insisting on an *orderly* camp, laid out neatly, in proper rows, and not the higger-mugger arrangement some of the other mere officers were allowing. At least she wasn't tripping over tent ropes or falling into firepits.

:I can smell Keth and magic,: Warrl said into her mind. *:You should see the mage-light soon.:*

"Thanks, Furball," Tarma replied, a little more mollified; she knew he wouldn't *hear* her over the howl of the wind, but he'd read the words in her mind. She kept straining her eyes through the tempest for a sight of the witchlight Keth had promised to leave at the front—to distinguish their tent from the two hundred odd just like it.

They were practically on top of it before she saw the light, a blue glow outlining the door flap and brightening the fastenings. She wrestled with the balky rawhide ties (the cold made her fingers stiff) and it took so long to get them unfastened that she was swearing enough to warm the whole camp.

before she had the tent flaps open. Having Warrl pressed up against her like a sodden, unhappy cat did not help.

The wind practically threw Tarma into the tent, and half the sleet that was knifing down on the camp tried to come in with her. Warrl remained plastered against her side, not at all helpful, smelling in the pungent, penetrating way only a wet wolf can smell—even if Warrl only resembled a wolf superficially. The *kyree* was not averse to reminding Tarma several times a day (as, in fact, he was doing now) that they *could* have been curled up in a cozy inn if they hadn't signed on with this mercenary company.

She turned her back to the occupant of the tent as soon as she got past the tent flaps; she needed all her attention to get them laced shut against the perverse pull of the wind. "Gods of damnation!" she spat through stiff lips, "Why did I *ever* think this was a good idea?"

Kethry, only just now waking from a light doze, refrained from replying; she just waited until Tarma got the tent closed up again. Then she spoke three guttural words, activating the spell she'd used there before drowsing off—and a warm yellow glow raced around the tent walls, meeting and spreading upward until the canvas was bathed in mellow light and the temperature within suddenly rose to that of a balmy spring day. Tarma sighed and sagged a little.

"Let me take that," Kethry said then, unwinding herself from the thick wool blankets of her bedroll, rising, and pulling the woolen coat, stiff with ice, from Tarma's angular shoulders. "Get out of those soaked clothes."

The swordswoman shook water out of her short-cropped black hair, and only just prevented Warrl from trying the same maneuver.

"*Don't you dare, you flea-bitten cur!* Gods above and below, you'll soak every damned thing in the tent!"

Warrl hung his head and looked sheepish, and waited for his mindmate to throw an old threadbare horse blanket over him. Tarma enveloped him in it, head to tail, held it in place while he shook himself, then used it to towel off his coarse gray-black fur.

"Glad to see you, Greeneyes," Tarma continued, stripping herself down to the skin, occasionally wincing as she moved. She rummaged in her pack, finding new underclothing, and finally pulling out dry breeches, thick leggings and shirt of a dark brown lambswool. "I thought you'd still be with your crew—"

Kethry gave an involuntary shudder of sympathy at the sight of her partner's nearly-emaciated frame. Tarma was always thin, but as this campaign had stretched on and on, she'd become nothing but whipcord over bone. She hadn't an ounce of flesh to spare; no wonder she complained of being cold so much! And the scars lacing her golden skin only gave a faint indication of the places where she'd taken deeper damage—places that would ache de monically in foul weather. Kethry gave her a spell another little mental nudge, sending the temperature of the tent a notch upward.

I should have been doing this on a regular basis, she told herself guiltily. *Well—that's so remedied.*

"—so there's not much more I can do." The sweet-faced sorceress gathered strands of hair like sun-touched amber into both hands, twisting her curly mane into a knot at the back of her neck. The light from the shaded lantern which hung on the tent's crossbar, augmented by the light of the shielding spell, was strong enough that Tarma noted the dark circles under her cloudy green eyes. "Tresti accomplishing more than I can at this point. You know my magic isn't really the Healing kind, and c

top of that, right now we have more wounded men than women.”

“And Need’ll do a man about as much good as a stick of wood.”

Kethry glanced at the plain shortsword slung on the tent’s centerpole, and nodded. “To tell you the truth, lately she won’t heal anybody but you or me of anything but *major* wounds, so she isn’t really useful at all at this point. I wonder sometimes if maybe she’s saving herself—Anyway, the last badly injured woman was your scout Mala this morning.”

“We got her to you in time? Gods be thanked!” Tarma felt the harpwire-taut muscles of her shoulders go lax with relief. Mala had intercepted an arrow when the scouts had been surprised by an enemy ambush; Tarma had felt personally responsible, since she’d sent Warrl off in the opposite direction only moments before. The scout had been barely conscious by the time they’d pounded up to the Sunhawk camp.

“Only just; an arrow in the gut is not something even for a Master-Healer to trifle with, and all we have is a Journeyman.”

“Teach me to steal eggs, why don’t you? Tell me something I *don’t* know,” Tarma snapped, ice-blue eyes narrowed in irritation, harsh voice and craggy-featured scowl making her look more like a hawk than ever.

Oops. A little too near the bone, I think.

“Temper,” Kethry cautioned; it had taken years of partnership for them to be able to say the right thing at the right time to each other, but these days they seldom fouled the relationship. “Whatever happened, you can’t undo it; you’d tell me that if the case were reversed. And Mala’s all right, so there’s no permanent harm done.”

“Gah—” Tarma shook her head again, then continued the shake right down to her bare feet, loosening all the muscles that had been tensed against cold and anger and frustration. “Sorry. My nerves have gone all to hell. Finish about Mala so I can tell the others.”

“Nothing much to tell; I had Need unsheathed and in her hands when they brought her inside the camp. The arrow’s out, the wound’s purified and stitched and half-healed, or better. She’ll be back dodging arrows—with a little more success, I hope!—in about a week. After that all I could do that was at all useful was to set up a *jesto-vath* around the infirmary tent—that’s a shielding spell like the one I just put on ours. After that I was useless, so I came back here. It was bad enough out there that I figured a *jesto-vath* on *our* tent was worth the energy expense, and I waited for you to get in before putting it in place so I wouldn’t have to cut it. Can’t have the Scoutmaster coming down with a fever. She smiled, and her wide green eyes sparkled with mischief. “Listen to you, though—two years ago you wouldn’t have touched a command position, and now you’re fretting over your scouts exactly the way Idra fusses over the rest of us.”

Tarma chuckled, feeling the tense muscles all over her body relaxing. “You know the saying.”

“Only too well—‘That was then, this is now; the moment is never the same twice.’ ”

“You’re learning. Gods, having a mage as a partner is useful.”

Tarma threw herself onto her bedroll, rolling over onto her back and putting her hands behind her head. She stared at the canvas of the tent roof, bright with yellow mage-light, and basked in the heat.

“I pity the rest of the Hawks, with nobody to weatherproof their tents, and nothing but an itty bit of brazier to keep it warm. Unless they’re twoing, in which case I wish them well.”

“Me too,” Kethry replied with a tired smile, sitting crosslegged on her own bedroll to fasten the knot of hair more securely, “though there’s only a handful really twoing it. I rather suspect even the ones that aren’t will bundle together for warmth, though, the way we used to when I wasn’t capable of putting up a *jesto-vath*.”

“You must be about Master-grade yourself by now, no?”

Tarma cracked her left eye open enough to see Kethry’s face. The question obviously caught the mage by surprise.

“Uh—”

“Beyond it?”

“I—”

“Thought so.” Tarma closed her eyes again in satisfaction. “This job should do it, then. Through Idra we’ll have contacts right up into the Royal ranks. If we can’t wangle the property, students and wherewithal for our schools after this, we’ll never get it.”

“We’d have had it before this if it hadn’t been for that damned minstrel!” Now it was Kethry’s turn to snap with irritation.

“*Must* you remind me?” Tarma groaned, burying her face in the crook of her arm. “Leslac, Leslac, if it weren’t for Bardic immunity I’d have killed you five times over!”

“You’d have had to stand in line,” Kethry countered with grim humor. “I’d have beat you to it. Bard enough that he sings songs about us, *worse* that he gets the salient points all bass-ackwards, but—”

“To give us the reputation that we’re shining warriors of the Light is *too damned much!*”

They had discovered some four or five years ago that there was a particular Bard, one Leslac by name, who was making a specialty of creating ballads about their exploits. That would have been all the good, for it was certainly spreading their name and reputation far and wide—except that he was *also* leaving the impression that the pair of them were less interested in money than in Just Causes.

Leslac had stressed and overstressed their habit of succoring women in distress and avenging those who were past distress. So now anyone who had an ax to grind came looking for them—more particularly, women. And usually they came with empty pockets, or damned little in the way of payment to offer, while the paying jobs they would *rather* have taken had been trickling away to others—because those who might have offered those jobs couldn’t believe they’d be interested in “mere money.”

And to add true insult to injury, a good half of the time Kethry’s geas-blade Need would force them into *taking* those worthless Just Causes. For Need’s geas was, as written on her blade, “Woman’s Need calls me/As Woman’s Need made me./Her Need will I answer/As my maker bade me.” By now Kethry was so soul-bonded to the sword that it would have taken a god to free her from it. Most of the time it was worth it; the blade imparted absolute weapons expertise to Kethry, and would Heal anything short of a death wound on any woman holding it. And after the debacle with the demon-godling Thalhkars, Need *had* seemed to quiet down in her demands, unless *directly* presented with a woman in dire trouble. But with all those Just Causes showing up, Need had been rapidly turning into something more than a bit expensive to be associated with, thanks to Leslac.

They’d been at their wits’ ends, and finally had gone to another couple of mercenaries, old friends of theirs, Justin Twoblade and Ikan Dryvale, for advice. They hadn’t really hoped the pair would have any notions, but they were the last resort.

And, somewhat to Tarma’s surprise, they’d *had* advice.

It was the off-season for the Jewel Merchants’ Guild, Justin and Ikan’s employers; that meant no caravans. And *that* meant that the paired mercenary guards were cosily holed up in their private quarters at the Broken Sword, with the winter months to while away. They certainly weren’t stinting themselves; they had a pair of very decent rooms, the Broken Sword’s excellent ale—and, as Tarma

discovered when she tapped at their door, no lack of female companionship. But the current pair of bright-eyed lovelies was sent pouting away when straw-haired Ikan answered their knock and discovered just who it was that had chosen to descend upon himself and his partner.

One of the innkeeper's quick-footed offspring was summoned then, and sent off for food and ale—for neither Justin nor his shieldbrother would hear a word of serious talk until everyone was settled and comfortable at their hearth, meat and drink at their elbows. Justin and Ikan took their hospitality very seriously.

"I've figured this was coming," Justin had said, somewhat to Tarma's shock, "And not just because of that idiot songster. You two have very unique and specialized skills—not like me and Ikan. You've gotten about as far as you can as an independent pairing. Now me and Ikan, we had the opposite problem. We're just ordinary fighting types; a bit better than most, but that's all that distinguishes us. We had to join a company to get a reputation; then we could live off that reputation as a pair. But you—you've got a reputation that will get you high fees from the right mercenary company."

Tarma had shaken her head doubtfully at that, but Justin had fixed her with his mournful houndlike eyes, and she'd held her peace.

"You, Tarma," he'd continued, "need much wider experience, especially experience in commanding others—and only a company will give you that. Kethry, you need to exercise skills and spells you wouldn't use in a partnership, and to learn how to delegate if your school is ever going to be successful, and again, you'll learn that in a company."

"Long speech," Tarma had commented sardonically.

"Well, I've got one, too," Ikan had said, winking a guileless blue eye at her. "You also need exposure to highborns, so that they know your reputation *isn't* just minstrelsy and moonshine. You haven't a choice; you truly need to join a company, one with a reputation of their own, one good enough that the highborns come to *them* for their contract. Then, once you *are* ready to hang up your blades and start your schools, you'll have noble patrons and noble pupils panting in anticipation of your teaching—and two not-so-noble aging fighters panting in anticipation of easy teaching jobs."

Kethry had laughed at Ikan's comic half-bow in their direction. "I take it that you already have a company in mind?"

"Idra's Sunhawks," Justin had replied blandly.

"The *Sunhawks*? Warrior's Oath—you'd aim us bloody damned high, wouldn't you?" Tarma had been well taken aback. For all that they were composed of specialist-troops—skirmishers, horse-archers and trackers—the Sunhawks' repute was so high that kings and queens *had* been known to negotiate their contracts with Idra in person. "Good gods, I should bloody well think highborns negotiate with them; their leader's of the damned Royal House of Rethwellan! And just how are we supposed to get a hearing with Captain Idra?"

"Us," Ikan had replied, stabbing a thumb at his chest. "We're ex-Hawks; we started with her, and probably would still be with her, but Idra was going more and more over to horse-archers, and we were getting less useful, so we decided to light out on our own. But we left on good terms; if you recommend that she give you a hearing, Idra will take our word on it."

"And once she sees that you're what you claim to be, you'll be in, never fear." Justin had finished for him. "Shin'a'in Kal'enedral—gods, you'd fit in like a sword in a sheath, Hawkface. And you, Kethry—Idra's always got use for another mage, 'specially one nearly Masterclass. The best she's got now is a couple of self-taught hedge-wizards. Add in Furball there—you'll be a combination she won't be able to resist."

So it had proved. With letters in their pouches from both Ikan and his partner (both could read and write, a rarity among highborn, much less mercenaries) they had headed for the Sunhawks' winter quarters, a tiny hill town called Hawksnest. The name was not an accident; the town owed its existence to the Sunhawks, who wintered there and kept their dependents there, those dependents that weren't permanent parts of the Company bivouac. Hawksnest was nestled in a mountain valley, sheltered from the worst of the mountaintop weather, and the fortified barracks complex of the Sunhawks stood between it and the valley entrance. When the Hawks rode out, a solid garrison *and* all the Hawks-in-training remained behind. Idra believed in creating an environment for her fighters in which the only worries they needed to have on campaign were associated *with* the campaign.

Signing with Idra was unlike signing with any other Company; most Hawks stayed with Idra for years—she had led the Company for nearly twenty years. She'd willingly renounced her position as third in line to the throne of Rethwellan twenty five years earlier, preferring freedom over luxury. She'd hired on with a mercenary company herself, then after five years of experience accompanied by her own steady rise within the ranks, had formed the Hawks.

Tarma had been impressed with the quarters and the town; the inhabitants were easy, cheerful and friendly—which spoke of good behavior on the part of the mercs. The Hawks' winter quarters were better than those of many standing armies, and Tarma had especially approved of the tall wooden palisade that stretched across the entrance to Hawksnest, a palisade guarded by both Hawks and townsmen. And the Hawks themselves—as rumor had painted them—were a tight and disciplined group; drilling even in the slack season, and showing no sign of winter-born softness.

Idra had sent for them herself after reading their letters; they found her in her office within the Hawks' barracks. She was a muscular, athletic looking woman, with the body of a born horsewoman, mouse-gray hair, a strong face that could have been used as the model for a heroic monument, and the direct and challenging gaze of the professional soldier.

"So," she'd said, when they took their seats across the scratched, worn table that served as her desk, "if I'm to trust Twoblade and Dryvale, it should be me begging you to sign on."

Kethry had blushed; Tarma had met that direct regard with an unwavering gaze of her own. "I'm Kal'enedral," Tarma said shortly. "If you know Shin'a'in, that should tell you something."

"Swordsworn, hmm?" The quick gray eyes took in Tarma's brown clothing. "Not on bloodfeud—"

"That was ended some time ago," Tarma told her, levelly. "We ended it, we two working together. That was how we met."

"Shin'a'in Kal'enedral and outClansman. Unlikely pairing—even given a common cause. So why are you still together?"

For answer they both turned up their right palms so that she could see the silver crescent-scars that decorated them. One eyebrow lifted, ever so slightly.

"Sa. *She'enedran*. That explains a bit. Seems I've heard of a pair like you."

"If it was in songs," Tarma winced, "let's just say the stories are true in the main, but false in the details. And the author constantly left out the fact that we've always done our proper planning before we ever took on the main event. Luck plays wondrous small part in what we do, if we've got any say in the matter. And besides all that—we're a lot more interested in making a living than being somebody's savior."

Idra had nodded; her expression had settled into something very like satisfaction. "One last question for each of you—what's your specialty, Shin'a'in—and what's your rank and school, mage?"

“Horseback skirmishing, as you probably figured, knowing me for Shin‘a’in.” Tarma had replied first. “I’m a damned good archer—probably as good as any you’ve got. I can fight afoot, but I’d rather not. We’ve both got battlesteeds, and I’m sure you know what *that* means. My secondary skill is tracking.”

“I’m White Winds, Journeyman; I’d say I lack a year or two of being Masterclass.” Kethry had given her answer hard on the heels of Tarma’s. “One other thing I think Ikan and Justin may have forgotten—Tarma is mindmate to a *kyree*, and I’ve got a bespelled blade I’m soul-bonded to. It gives me weapons expertise, so I’m pretty good at keeping myself in one piece on a battlefield; that’s damned useful in a fight, you won’t have to spare anybody to look after me. And besides that, it will Heal most wounds for a woman—and that’s any woman, not just me.”

Idra had not missed the implication. “But not a man, eh? Peculiar, but—well, I’m no mage, can’t fathom your ways. About half my force is female, so that would come in pretty useful, regardless. But White Winds—that’s no Healing school.”

“No, it’s not,” Kethry agreed, “I haven’t the greater Healing magics, just a few of the lesser. But I’ve got the battle-magics, and the defensive magics. I’m not one to stand in the back of a fight and shriek, and look appalled—”

For the first time Idra smiled. “No, I would guess not, for all that you look better suited to a bow than a battlefield. About the *kyree*—we’re talking Pelagir Hills changeling, here? Standard wolf shape?”

“*Hai*—overall he’s built like a predator cat, but he’s got the coat and head of a wolf. Shouldn’t come to about my waist, he runs like a Plains grasscat; no stamina for a long march, but he’s used to riding pillion with me.” Tarma’s description made Idra nod, eyes narrowed in *definite* satisfaction. “He’s got a certain ability at smelling out magic, and a certain immunity to it; given he’s from the Pelagirs he might have other tricks, but he hasn’t used them around me yet. Mindspeaks, too, mostly to me, but he could probably make himself heard to anyone with a touch of the Gift. Useful scout, even more useful as an infiltrator. But be aware that he eats a lot, and if he can’t hunt, he’ll be wanting fresh meat daily. That’ll have to be part of any contract we sign.”

“Well, from what my boys say, what I knew by reputation, and what you’ve told me, I don’t think I need any more information. Only one thing I don’t reckon—” Idra had said, broad brow creased with honest puzzlement. “If you don’t mind my asking what’s none of my business even if I *do* sign you, why’s the *kyree* mindmate to the fighter and not the mage’s familiar?”

Tarma groaned, then, and Kethry laughed. “Oh, Warrl has a mind of his own,” the mage had answered, “I *had* been the one doing the calling, but he made the decision. He decided that I didn’t need him, and Tarma did.”

“So besides your formidable talents, I get three recruits, not two; three used to teamworking. No commander in her right mind would argue with that.” Idra then stood up, and pushed papers across her desk to them. “Sign those, my friends, if you’re still so minded, and you’ll be Sunhawks before the ink dries.”

So it had been. Now Tarma was subcommander of the scouts, and Keth was in charge of the motley crew concerned with Healing and magery—two hedge-mages, a field-surgeon and herbalist and her two apprentices, and a Healing Priest of Shayana. “Priestess” would have been a more accurate title, but the Shayana’s devotees did not make any gender differences in their rankings, which ofttime confused someone who expected one sex and got the opposite. Tresti was handfasted to Sewen, Idra

Second, a weathered, big-boned, former trooper; that sometimes caused Keth sleepless nights. She wondered what would happen if it was ever Sewen carried in through the door flap of the infirmary, but the possibility never seemed to bother Tresti.

Tarma and Kethry had fought in two intense campaigns, each lasting barely a season; this was the third, and it had been brutal from the start. But then, that was often the case with civil war and rebellion.

Ten moons ago, the King of Jkatha had died, declaring his Queen, Sursha, to be his successor and Regent for their three children. Eight moons ago Sursha's brother-in-law, Declin Lord Kelcrag, had made a bid for the throne with his own armed might.

Lord Kelcrag was initially successful in his attempt, actually driving Sursha and her allies out of the Throne City and into the provinces. But he could not eliminate them, and he had made the mistake of assuming that defeat meant that they would vanish.

Queen Sursha had talent and wisdom—the talent to attract both loyal and *capable* people to her cause, and the wisdom to know when to stand back and let *them* do what was needful, however distasteful that might be to her gentle sensibilities. That talent won half the kingdom to her side; that wisdom allowed her to pick an otherwise rough-hewn provincial noble, Havak Lord Leamount, as her General-In-Chief and led her to give *him* her full and open support even when his decisions were personally repugnant to her.

General Lord Leamount levied or begged troops from every source he could—and then hired specialists to fill in the skill gaps his levies didn't have.

And one of the first mercenary Captains he had approached was Idra. His troops were mostly foot soldiers with a generous leavening of heavy horse—no skirmishers, no scouts, no light horse at all, other than his own personal levy of hill-clansmen. The hillmen were mounted on rugged little ponies; good for rough country but slow in open areas, and useless as strike-and-run skirmishers.

And by now Idra's troops were second to none, thanks in no small part to Tarma. The Shin'a'in had seen no reason why she could not benefit her presumptive clan's coffers, and her new comrades did as well; she'd arranged for the Sunhawks to get first pick of the sale-horses of Tale'sedrin. These weren't battlesteeds, which were *never* let out of Shin'a'in hands, but they weren't culls either, which was what the Sunhawks had been seeing. And when the Hawks had snapped up every beast she offered, she'd arranged for four more clans to bring in their first-pick horses as well.

So now the Hawks were better mounted than most nobles, on horses that could be counted as extra weapons in a close-in fight.

That fact was not lost on Lord Leamount, nor was he blind to Idra's canny grasp of strategy. Idra was made part of the High Command, and pretty much allowed to dictate *how* her Hawks were used.

As a result, although the fighting had been vicious, the Hawks were still at something like four-fifths strength; their ranks were nowhere near as decimated as they might have been under a commander who threw them recklessly at the enemy, rather than using them to their best advantage.

At Midsummer, Lord Leamount's combined forces had fallen on the Throne City and driven Lord Kelcrag out. Every move Kelcrag had made since then had been one of retreat. His retreat had been hard fought, and each acre of ground had been bitterly contested, but it had been an inexorable series of losses.

But now autumn was half over; he had made a break-and-run, and at this point everyone knew why. Leamount's armies knew why. He was choosing to make a last stand on ground *he* had picked.

Both sides knew this next battle would *have* to bring the war to a conclusion. In winter it would be impossible to continue any kind of real fight—the best outcome would be stalemate as troops of both

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