

THE WARS OF LIGHT AND SHADOW VOLUME NINE

JANNY WURTS

Initiate's Trial




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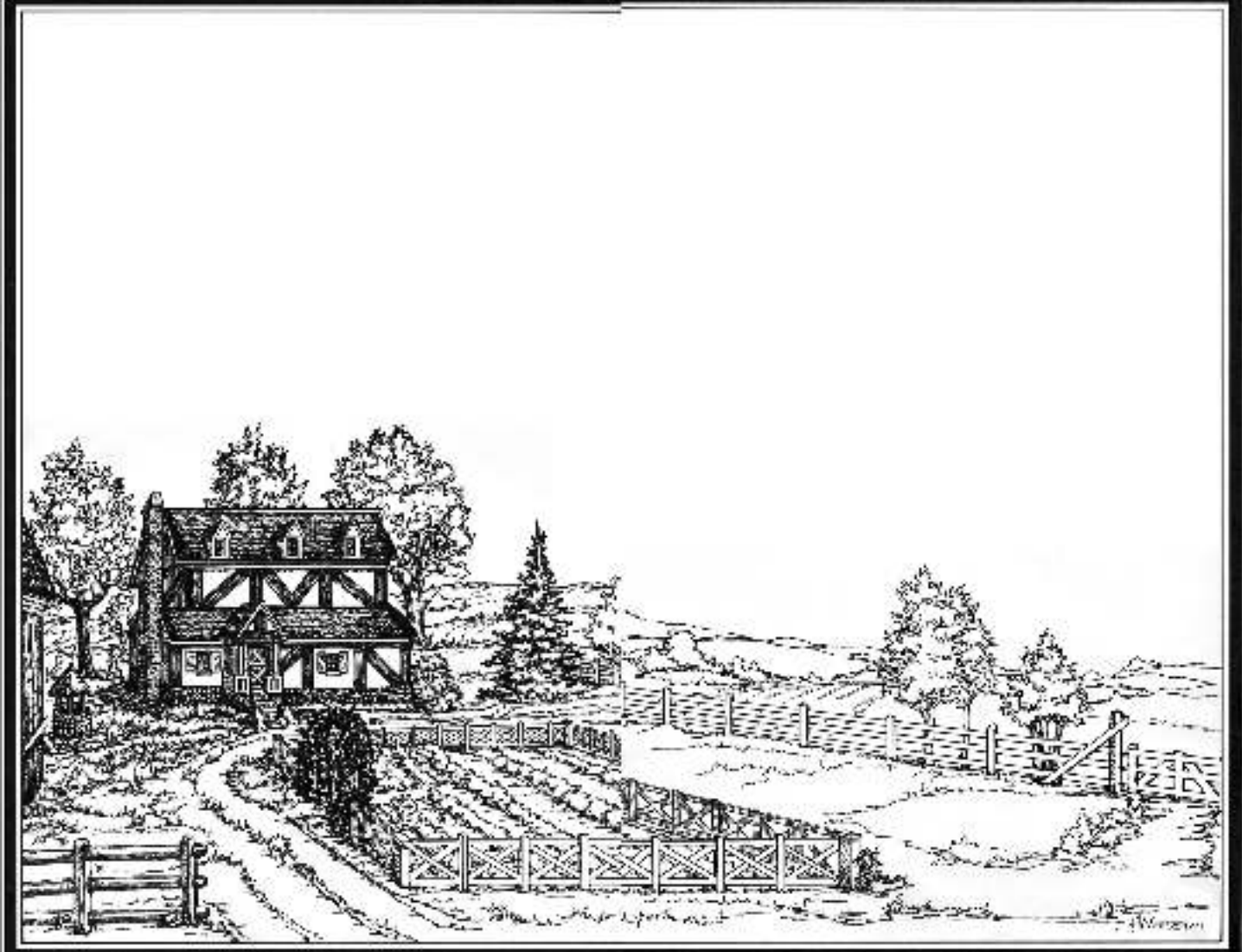
INITIATE'S TRIAL

The Wars of Light and Shadow

VOLUME 9

FIRST BOOK OF
SWORD OF THE CANON

 **HARPER Voyager**
An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers



Dedication

For Abner Stein

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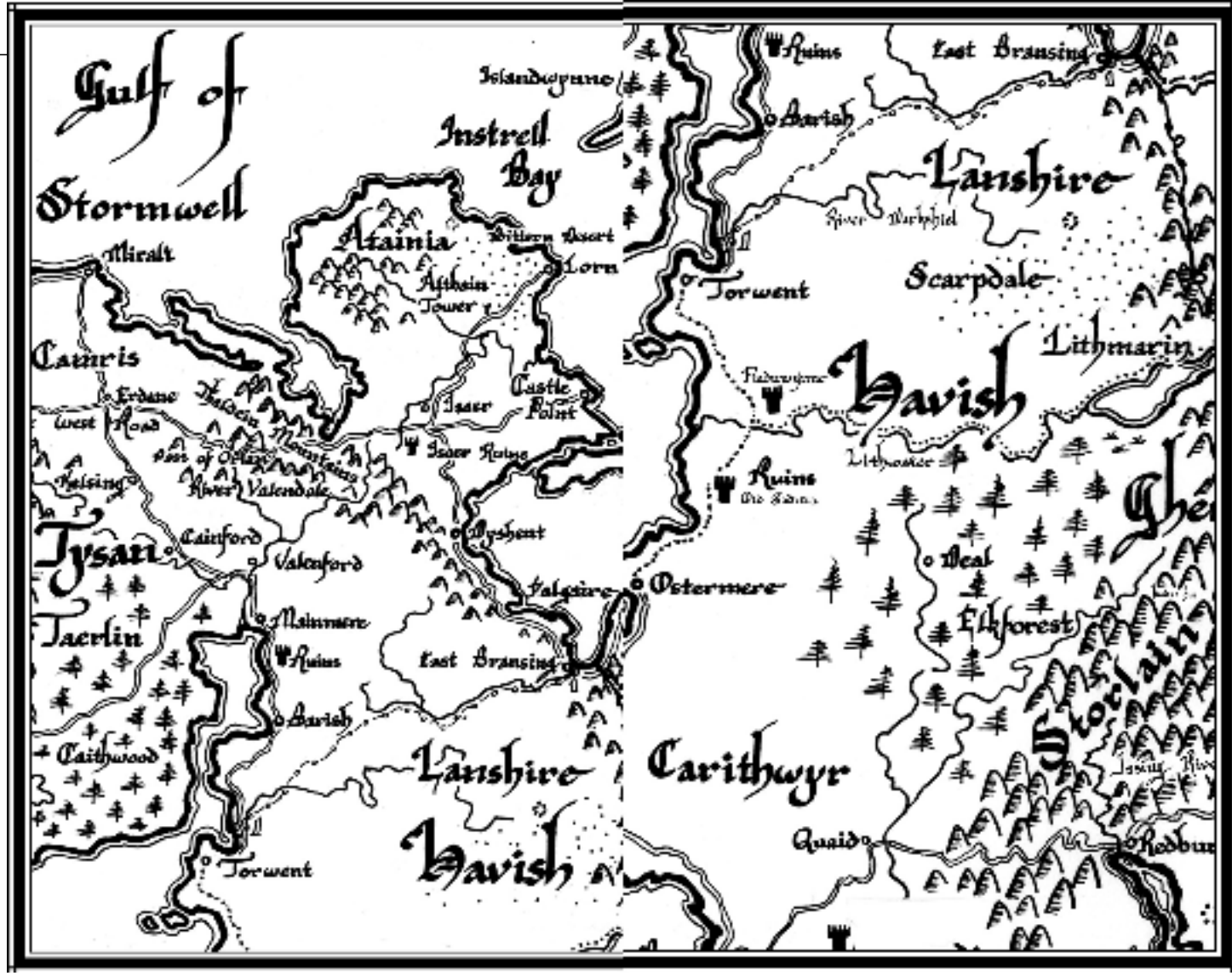
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Third Age Year 5922

Declared Under Interdict:

THE KINGDOM OF HAVISH

*For crown-sanctioned liaison with Darkness,
as the iniquitous haven for Old Blood Talent,
and for armed defense of Heretical Practice.*

*Henceforth, no True Sect Faithful shall traffic therein,
or flout the High Temple's Trade Embargo.*

—decreed by the Light's Conclave, Erdane

3rd Year of the Canon • Third Age 5686



I. Imprisoned

All of his days began the same way. He awoke without any memory. Nameless, he knew nothing at all of his past. Search though he might, his thoughts churned in circles. He encountered no sense of self-purpose. Nothing beyond the fact, *I exist*, that might endow him with a future.

Eyes opened, he surveyed his featureless surroundings. The place did not appear to have walls. Which deception perhaps prompted his first recollection. He understood that the silver reflective enclosure was a prison, woven of impenetrable spells. Colourless, textureless, the barrier enveloped him in a suspended state of neutrality, neither hot nor cold, apparently without a ceiling or floor, as seamlessly sealed as a bubble. Bland, like the clothing he was given to wear: a white shirt and dark breeches stitched from a nondescript fabric, fitted comfortably to his slight frame. His diligent keepers, whoever they were, did not wish him to suffer indignity.

Unable to view his reflection, and with no outside window to relieve the monotony, he began with a survey of his own hands. Their structure at least prompted the insight that he was individual, with a claim to both history and character. His fingers were refined, almost delicate, the bones cleanly sculpted beneath his lean flesh. The left ones were tipped with calluses. Insight suggested the wear had been caused by repeated deft pressure to stop off taut strings. First epiphany, he recalled the joy of making of music. But not how he had acquired the scars.

Tentative, uneasy, though he knew not why, he traced the whitened welt, gouged across his right palm and snaked in a half twist up his right forearm, to end at the elbow. The shudder raised by his tentative touch roused an unpleasant recall of searing fire. That burn crossed other weals, surely older. Disturbed, he found that both wrists, and his ankles, bore the chafe marks left ingrained by steel shackles.

Rage stirred in him then, a formless awakening arisen from a prior trauma. Someone else had taken him captive before this. The visceral remembrance of freedom denied and the resurgent echo of rebellious anger shuddered in recoil through him. Still nameless, he knew he had broken that chain and those manacles.

Why was he here? Who held him caged, now?

But his fogged memory refused to unveil the hidden face of his enemy. The record of past violence written into his flesh failed to account for his straits. He remembered no crime, no offence enacted against humanity, to have earned him this punishing state of incarceration.

His questions chased themselves into holes, stubbornly uninformative. By then, the explosive surge of his fury lashed him onto his feet. He paced. Every day, like the trapped tiger, untamed emotion spurred his frantic steps. The blank, silver prison swallowed up his dire restlessness. Its forces encapsulated his person and absorbed his aggression without a ripple. His ire blazed deeper, an unstoppable torrent that stripped his nerves livid. How he hated the fact he was helpless! He was given no target to savage. No captor appeared on which to salve his ravaging grief for the loss of his being. He had no means to wreak vengeance for the outright theft of the *person* he had been, and rightfulness should be, since he was kept living.

When the edged intensity of his temper peaked, the old woman always appeared. She came swathed head to foot in a violet mantle, sewn with nine scarlet bands upon her full sleeves. He never observed her arrival, had no way to detect the means or the moment that permitted her soundless entry. The primal urge to close his grip on her throat always died when she offered him the lyranthe.

The instrument consumed his attention. Seductive snare, its promise bewitched him. Fourteen silver-wound strings and polished wood woke an ache, unrequited, that glimmered with love beyond hatred and freedoms untouched by captivity. Music, he knew. The structure of melody, cadence, and song framed a power instinctive as breath. Magnetic attraction broke his resistance. He succumbed every time, and accepted the gift although, beyond question, it came from the hand that abused him. Though such acquiescence should seal his downfall, his innate desire won out. No other choice existed, for him, shut in the unending horror of isolation, except to die without the courage for harmony, bereft of his last human grace.

Imperative instinct silenced his questions as he took the instrument into his arms. His trembling hands caressed lacquered wood. Beyond words, he stroked shining strings with the desperation of the addicted. The brilliance of their sound endowed him with solace. Music opened the channel for healing and lent his last foothold on sanity. Or perhaps the cold stir of true memory served warning: if he failed to ply his art without flaw, he could fall to mortal danger.

Sweet longing transformed into shocking need. Now hurried, he tuned the strings quickly. Shaken all but undone by foreboding, he broke into a sudden sweat. A prickle lifted the hair at his nape. The air a ranging, unpleasant chill chased his spine.

He remembered, now: thousands upon thousands of days just like this one, each filled by terror that flitted, unseen, and challenged his innate survival.

His struck notes had seeded a perilous change. As though a tossed stone had crashed through a pool, the ripple broke the stilled tension. His prison was no longer seamless, or safe. An uncanny rift opened up underfoot, letting in an inchoate void that now stirred with purposeful movement. Dread lurked in its shadow. Though the eye could discern neither form nor shape, an unseen invader was stalking him.

He recoiled a step. Fingers flying, he plucked a spray of harmonics, then cranked the drone string into stinging, true pitch.

Sight still showed him nothing. Warned onto his guard, he trusted the inner panic, that he was not secure, or alone.

Something uncanny had been let inside, though it ranged beyond reach of his senses. The intrusion flicked him as a breath of cold, then jabbed in pure malice and tested his stance, prying to thrust its way into him. The first tingle of etheric assault laced his skin, sharp as the teeth of a starved predator. Anything that possessed life-force was prey, and in this place, he offered the only available source of nourishment. The old woman had gone the same way she had entered, and left him to his own devices.

Sometime, somewhere, he had gained a master's initiate discipline. Those trained faculties responded to primal fear. Bristled into a state of reflexive defense, he needed no trappings of lost personality to recognize the opening throes of a fatal conflict.

A free wraith battled him for possession. Countless millions of others had done the same, prior to his encounter with this one. He knew what to expect. As its ungoverned whirlwind of hatred sought to unbalance him, his own fervid terror would break him. The entity could feed on his leaked strength and vitality. To sate ravening hunger, it would wring him until exhaustion drained his resistance. The entity's ferocity would sap his will and supplant his natural awareness. Against the invasive threat of possession, the only weapon he had was the lyranthe and the empowered expression of music.

Peerless talent, he plied his command over fret and string and unleashed a blazing cascade of bright harmony. Jigs and sprightly reels burst from the suppressed well of his deepest longing, first driving him to stamp in madcap rhythm, then lifting his heart to let go and soar. He played music that cried out for laughter, a consummate fusion of tone and bright artistry woven into boundless exaltation. No intrusive attack might swerve his rapt focus. His fingers carried the dance without stumbling. Aggressive oppression must bow to such banishment. He let no hostile thrust of vicious dissonance raze through his exacting discipline. Dread and ruin could not mar the deathless flame he rekindled from inspiration and hope.

Unaware of a mastery that once had commanded the stature of a formal title, the bard tuned his very being to light. Sound gilded his spirit, then forged him, whole, behind an unbreachable bastion. For as long as he played, he could not be tamed. Spirit, raised to an incandescence of joy, could not be caged, or broken to mindless suffering. Remembrance poured back, as phrase upon phrase of melody took wing through the matchless skill of his fingers. He had weathered assaults as perilous as this one. A sublime triumph had brought him the victory.

His safety lay in defining the wraith's lost identity. He must achieve this before, Name-forsaken, the howling emptiness of its ferocity beat him down into subjugation.

Cruel desperation guided his tactics. Before he tired, he must find the single, true line of song that could bind the wraith into sympathetic entrancement. Once, before trauma deranged its identity, it had been born enfleshed and human. It had possessed a mother, a father, a family, and a best beloved. More, it also would own the individualized spark of the greater love that sourced its original being. Gently, with tacit tenderness, the musician expanded his range. Poised with single-minded intention, brave enough to extend his most vulnerable sensitivity, he struck the testing, delicate notes to tease out the first flicker of emotional response. Straining, he listened for the pulsed echo that signalled harmonic confluence.

He would sound out the wraith's obscured self, his tune led by the resonance of its genuine being.

Note for clean note, it would fight his discovery. Blandished by his music, it still would seek to hide, sundered past sanity and shattered by surly fury that rejected the concept of solace. Cut off from reprieve, its hopeless despair perceived no other option, far less understood any balm great enough to ease its deviant existence.

But the bard possessed a relentless compassion. Cued, measure by measure, he stitched a haunting descant above his foundation of ineffable joy. He formed the darker phrases that whimpered of pain, themes of crippling loss that had cankered, unanswered, amid endless vistas of loneliness. The wraith was affirmed, first of all, as it lived, but without criticism or judgement. Where the deep, questioning tones brushed against its true pattern, the musician extended his chord and laid claim. His structural invention raised a forgotten beauty from dissonance and reclothed ancient wounds with love's purity.

He refused to recoil from hideous ugliness. The most horrific shriek of torment must not haze his sweet measures into retreat.

Immersed in a melting sequence of song, the bard let the wraith's deathless rage become mirrored gently, terribly, unflinching in honesty, he described the balked need, then the hurt, raw enough to devour all resilience of spirit. Human himself, he acknowledged the hollow agony of separation. Captive as well, but unbroken yet, he encompassed the cry for requital that festered the wraith's insatiable need.

His music wept the river of tears that purposeless emptiness forgot how to express. Unreeled as a thread of glittering gold flung downwards into the void, he probed the wrack spun by the wraith's blinded misery. He sifted, patient, through veils of dread fear, and chipped at the tarnish of desolation. Beneath the bleak chasm of alienation lay the buried gleam of forgotten identity. He must plumb the pit and shape the wraith's Name, before its crazed torment wore away concentration and turned at the last to consume him.

Harmonics spiralled into the air and woke other tremors of insight. Touched by echoes of his own buried memories, the bard encountered themes from the essence of his very self. Bright flashes of resonance sprang from strengths he had once expressed in full cognizance. The unconscious awareness shimmered within him, until the aching tremors of stifled experience stormed over his nerves in sweet waves. *He had known a forest clearing by night, ringing with cascades of unworldly harmony played upon crystalline flutes. Partnered in matchless love, he had cherished a woman with such bonfire passion that the land's flux had ignited to burning. His own aroused flesh, ablaze with hers, had scalded them both, incandescent...*

Even the suggested memory of *her* evoked longing beyond all threat of danger to bridle.

Loss followed hard on the heels of epiphany. Fast as his fingers spun song to recover her, *the ghost of her being no longer lived in his mind.*

He tasted the cinders of absolute grief, and pain great enough to seduce him. The glass edge of torment nearly made him let go: how easy to embrace the blind ease of oblivion. Surrender beckoned him towards the numb absolution of apathy and promised the end of intolerable sorrow – which was the same lie proffered by the wraith. Almost, he had been lulled to forget the stalking presence of the lethal danger.

Bare-fisted courage braced the bard's rocked commitment. He firmed his purpose. Determined to ride out the rip tide of unrequited futility, though the cost left him weeping forever, he unleashed his yearning of spirit until his trained fingers howled his agonized emptiness into grace upon silver wound strings.

Too late, he realized his effort went wrong. Unstrung past recovery, self-betrayed by the diabolic mistake that had tripped him, he realized the quickened voice of his past had wakened too many powerful echoes. Taken in, he himself had succumbed to beguilement. The pattern played in his structure belonged to no starveling wraith! Waylaid by his own searing mastery, he discovered himself stripped naked, the strains of his own Name resounded upon the loom of creation. Left with every guarded boundary undone, he stood shieldless before this antagonist. Of the countless thousands

ravenous entities his talent had peeled down to vulnerability and redeemed with tender compassion. ~~this one did not seize upon his disadvantage. It did not rip hungrily into his essence, hating the blood and the bone of him.~~ Rather than savage him in his defeat, this intelligence met his terror with a gentleness and pity that steadied his measures to haunted wistfulness. Shocked soul deep, he found his tears streaming for a pain all his own, with himself, the bird caged with clipped wings.

Immersed, he could not tear his rapt focus away. The net of his true Name surrounded him without struggle, soft as a caul, even as the ringing chords under his hands sealed the framework of his imperative summoning.

His wily contender was no wraith at all, *and on this day, never had been.* Enthralled by the gift of his own nature, he beheld the trickster at the last, illumined by the living force of his music, now upraised to the beacon flare of true magecraft. He faced another veiled crone, not the same who had delivered the lyranthe: that one was never his friend.

This woman wore no shimmering violet mantle. Her cuffs were not banded with scarlet. Instead, a single ribbon of white silk shone moon silver against her plain robe of grey wool.

Initiate discipline quelled the shocked reflex that urged him to stop off his strings and unspin the illusion of substance. Blind rage could at least seize that destructive outlet, even at risk of unravelling the most vital part of himself. Yet before his lightning reflex forced annihilation, she tilted her veiled head and spoke.

‘Choose wisely.’ Voice she had, tender enough to wrench his exposed heart-strings.

Wracked foolish with dread, all but paralyzed by fear of the price he might pay if he dared to listen, he fought the dark pull of his agony. Dispossessed, he owned nothing else but his music. With his life defended that talent. Although sorely afraid, he cherished the strings, infallibly striking the notes that refined the connection, strung thin as a cobweb between them.

‘You are finished with banishing free wraiths,’ the crone said with ineffable gentleness. ‘This hideous trial is over.’

But he heard the clear warning she left unspoken, laced through his echoed counterpoint: that his future course of confinement extended without the fierce solace of the lyranthe. The other hag in her purple robes well knew that his gift for song might be turned to forge the key to wrest back his freedom.

His pealing cry of resentment retorted: repeatedly he had tested the enspelled barrier that hemmed him! Whenever he tried to break through, other forces would answer, bleeding him until he lay helplessly prostrate. The silvery walls of sealed spells locked him down under twisted skeins of revilement. If he ventured too close, he trod a verbal bed of live coals that burned him to humiliation beyond endurance. He crumpled, each time, savaged by accusations that pierced without mercy: ‘*You have destroyed the woman you loved, left her forgotten and abandoned. Ruin walks in your footsteps. Behold the days when you trampled down hope. Come forward, only to suffer again! Walk your scarlet-soaked battle-fields and acknowledge your legions of slaughtered dead.*’

The veiled woman wept in sympathy with him. While his music transmitted the relentless sting to his cringing nerves, she did not spurn him with scorn. As if he was not wretched, or defiled beyond bearing, she answered with consolation.

‘You are not all they say. Truth has many facets, and your eyes have borne witness to more depths than most. If anyone claims that you sold yourself out, and betrayed every love you once cherished, say otherwise. Your past never followed the ruinous path, as your captors claim, to your detriment. Oh, you have wept! You have survived horrors. Truly, you have suffered all measure of grief, your inner heart cannot lie to you. But emotions can be manipulated to extract an undue toll of cruelty.’

Never bow to defeat! Not once have you forsaken the ground you stood with steadfast integrity, and even bled to secure.'

He let his notes answer, distrustful of words. What facts supported her bed-rock assurance? Against the conditioned responses he *knew*, her contrary statement meant nothing.

She did not disagree. Would not belittle the terror that clamoured, racing his breath until the black-out pall of self-hatred threatened to crush him.

'Doubt frames the walls of your prison,' she said. 'Some of your uncertainties hide deeper truths. Others mask distortions and outright falsehoods, crafted by design to break down your spirit and finally destroy you. Are you alive enough to fight back?'

Battle, he knew. His bitter contests with uncounted free wraiths affirmed his hard-won experience. No matter how often he tasted defeat, his core fire would not stay doused. He might not *remember* his history, or the deeds he had written by choice, under Name. But through his skilled hands upon the lyranthe, his defiant joy shouted, undimmed and unbeaten.

Behind her grey veil, the old woman laughed. 'True as the line of your birthright,' she mused. 'Never let go! Not until you reclaim the blood-born right to your whole being.'

She extended her hand and dangled before him a shining white crystal, strung on a silver chain. 'This quartz holds the spell that imprisons your spirit. Sing for your liberty with passionate grace, and the matrix that binds you must shatter.'

Urgency thrummed the strings under his hands. His rushed pulse chased the reach of his terror. Yet no hesitation remarked the shift as he changed the intent that founded his next measures. Where before, his shaped art aligned outward to seek the Name of another, now, he pitched his quest inward to ignite the lamp at the source of himself.

The first clear notes he struck from the heart collapsed the sensory web of his perception. Falling, he tumbled. His aware grasp on the lyranthe dissolved as his balance upended.

Then a *snap!* ripped through his tumbling frame. The old woman vanished, along with the featureless, dreary envelope that sealed his long-term confinement.

In place of the null grip of emptiness, he stood, ankle deep in muddy loam. Disoriented, utterly, by the nip of brisk wind, he smelled damp leaves, and the tang of hoar-frost on thickets and grasses. The sudden shock of concrete awareness smashed over his uprooted perception and shattered his equilibrium. Dizzied by the abrupt transition, he crashed to his knees. The jar of firm ground jolted his bones and snapped his teeth shut, while panic spurred his raced pulse and tensioned his breathing.

Who was he? Where was he? No memory of the bodily self he inhabited explained how he came *from where* – to awake as though dropped from the void into this sere autumn garden. He stared benighted, and left at a loss.

Grey mist dripped off a tangle of grape-vines, laddered up a weathered trellis that leaned on a ruined stone wall. The chill in the air suggested daybreak, thickened by the mouldering fust of turned leaves. Whiskered ice silvered the vegetable plot where he shivered, distressed and disoriented. The last hardy stems and a few runners of gourd still hoarded the green bestowed by the last kiss of summer. A wooden rake lay fallen nearby. Sweat laced his wrists, and mud stained the patched cuffs of his shirt and breeches. As if all along, he had laboured to mulch the tough stubble left after a late season harvest. He had worked the earth here – who knew for how long – to tidy the rows of a field bedded to lie fallow for winter.

Which situation made no living sense, disconnected from all that he knew of existence.

He traced the coarse, callused skin of his palms with a shudder of stark disbelief. These cracked nails and chapped knuckles *had not, in this place, ever wrought superlative music on the fret and*

string of any earthly instrument. Every artful line of his own refined melody deserted his cognizance, lost to him as though hurled to oblivion.

Nameless, rudderless, homeless, he wept shining tears for he knew not what – perhaps he ached for gratitude, perhaps for grief, perhaps for a talent he may never have owned, except in the fled echoes of his dreams.

Or maybe he cried for the merciless hurt inflicted by bewildered confusion.

The only congruity left was the scars, graven into the chapped grain of his skin. They alone marked the frightful proof of a history that *some event, or someone* had snatched away, then left him bereft. Beneath a brightening sky, buffeted by a southerly wind that forepromised the misery of coming rain by evening, he shook off his distress and reclaimed his feet. A resiliency he had forgotten he possessed raised his courage to survey the landscape. Ahead, a wrought-iron gateway led through the crumbled wall. The barred portal hung open. Chafed mad by confinement, he kicked clear of the furrow that mired his toes. Whether the way out was a baited trap, he welcomed the reckless risk. Though the impulsive presumption should kill him, he assayed the first bold step towards the overgrown lane, that led towards the unkempt fringe of autumn woodland beyond the gap.

No one's hand stopped him. When no outcry arose in alarm, he tried another stride, then another. Then he stumbled headlong into a run, upon legs that felt clumsy and strange, bearing his ungainly weight.

He never sighted the lady in grey though she observed his terrified departure. Concealed in one of the tangled thickets that bounded the deserted garden, she took extreme care not to draw his attention. Motionless, she watched his panicked spurt down the carriage-way, once in antiquity paved with white gravel to welcome refined guests to an earl's summer palace. The ancient woman relaxed her clasped hands and sighed in grateful relief.

Blessed she was, to assist the release of a spirit intact and unbroken.

For the prisoner just restored to liberty had endured an incarceration far longer than any mortal being should ever be made to withstand.

Once his flight reached the tree-line, barely moments after his lonely form vanished from sight, the crone knelt amid the browned stems of wild thorn. She opened her clenched and bloodied palms and buried the smeared fragments of shattered crystal and broken links that remained of the signet ring and forged chain that had bound him. Tears of bitter anger striped her withered cheeks as she rammed cold earth ovetop the unpleasant remnants. For his life's sake, no more could be done to assist his escape without danger.

Her fugitive must be left alone on the run. To survive the long reach of his enemies, he would take the harsh road to rediscover himself. If he had been granted the most slender chance to foil the deadly pursuit of the captors who soon would be hunting him, she could not spare him from the brutal whirlwind lash of consequence: *the obliteration of his identity provided his only protection.* No friendly hands could shield him from the blow, when in due time he encountered how sorrowfully he had been sold out and betrayed.

The crone's prayer was not empty as she turned her back on the man whose charge had encompassed her life's work. 'May Mother Dark's powers lend you the strength to stand your firm course through the maelstrom.'

On the very same crisp autumn morning, already saddled with troubles that threatened a crofter's mean livelihood, two brothers worked side by side, set at odds, as they hitched the yoked ox to the

wagon shafts. Neither guessed, at the time, what that fateful market-day trip into Kelsing would bring. Except for the unusual, fierce pitch of their argument, nothing about their hard-nosed, haunted quiet seemed out of the ordinary. The bushels of apples and crates of runt poultry bound for sale had already been loaded. Square jaws clenched, their seething rage crammed into hurtful silence, Efflin and Tarens both struggled, and failed, to bury the axe resharpened by their wounded grief.

The toll taken by last summer's outbreak of fever had been too swift, and their losses, too tragically recent. No more would their badgering nephews pull pranks. No filched lengths of garden twine, strung underfoot, tripped up the feet of the unwary. No rash little hands misdirected the buckles and entangled the harness, or exasperated them with the endearing hindrance, as hysterical poultry flapped free of mischievously unlatched crates. Never again would their chatterbox aunt pounce in the fracas, or tuck in loose shirttails with floury hands. Adult males and wild offspring alike would now wince as she scolded over their foolish laughter and larking idiocy.

Which hurt that much worse, when the shouting match over the surly bull's fate devolved from scorched language to fisticuffs. Big men, as honest with fights as they were with the stewardship of family assets, both brothers now puffed, grazed scarlet as schoolboys, stiffly nursing the sting of scuffed knuckles.

'Could be we'll regret not keeping yon beef on the hoof to ease the pinch at midwinter,' said Tarens. Tenderly, he fingered the bruise that swelled into a noxious, black eye. Not the price of his brother's mulish punch, but from a headlong bash into a fence-post, caused by the cantankerous, four-legged creature his argument still defended.

'Be claimed off us for our unpaid taxes, first!' Efflin snapped, shoulders hunched, with his back turned. Leaf brown beside his younger sibling's blond fairness, he scowled under his hat brim and waited. Since the snorting, loose bull still rampaged at large, not yet ready to settle and graze, he declared, 'Sell that brute for a breeder, we could pay off the debt. Maybe have a little left over. A brace of coneys could set young in time for the feast over solstice.'

'Without corn to fatten them? They'd just grow ribs.' Tarens braced himself upright, forced to maintain a resentful stand-off while the parked wagon propped his shaky legs. 'Shadow take the damned coin and the rabbits! We can't brazen through a live sale since you know the randy calves better than that bullock would be hell-bound to suffer abuse.'

Efflin rounded, fists cocked to strike, when their younger sister Kerelie burst, railing, out of the cottage door.

'Leave you to yourselves, and here's both of you, trading blows like two frothing theosophers!' She snatched her embroidered skirt clear of the frost-rimed mud. A wet dish-cloth bunched over her stout forearm, she thrust into the fray with a raw slice of meat robbed off the hook in the pantry. The cut was too choice to succour a sibling, never mind one whose daft habit of sentiment had lately laid him out cold in the barn-yard. 'Here's a fine supper, wasted! Aren't we burdened enough, without your louts bickering fit to break your necks?'

The work and the winter would not forgive the fact they were drastically short-handed. Still huffing, Kerelie tossed the chilled meat to the reeling victim. Then she laced into her unrepentant older brother, whose level good sense had flown south since their untimely inheritance placed him at the head of the household. 'Tarens is right! 'Tis a hazard to breed that cantankerous beast, and no! You will not sell it dear for its ugly temperament! That's cruelty. The dastards who buy such rogues use them to bait their vicious dogs for blood-sport wagers!'

Efflin tipped back the lumpish felt hat that lent him the semblance of an unsheared ram. Eyebrows raised, without sympathy for his battered younger brother, he stonewalled his sister with a stoic shrug.

wiped a blood smear from his split lip, and that fast, caught the black bullock. With its nose ring rope fast to the tail-gate, the brute pawed and gored the stout slats, unaware it had wrecked its last claim long life and a docile maturity.

The beast snorted yet when the wagon rolled out, dragging it towards the stock-yard and slaughter. The brothers perched side by side on the seat, their broad shoulders rubbed by the jounce at each bump. They winced with the same hissed breaths as the vehicle swayed to the rake of the furious animal's capped horns. The bone-jarring journey to Kelsing market promised them no respite from their ill-gotten injuries. A stupid predicament, which once would have made them the butt of the uncle's banter.

But the care-free family of those days had gone. Truth brooded amid their sullen silence: that the bull's sale might buy a month's time but not turn the tide of bad fortune. Rigid tradition still ruled the westlands: a married man always left home to increase the prosperity of his wife's family. The moment's immoderate pain was a pittance against straits that could force them to sacrifice the remaining measure of happiness.

The wagon rolled into the morning's choked mist and turned north on the rutted trade-road that wound through the wood. Already, the maples had shed their foliage cloaks of bright russet and flame. The crabbed oaks wore drab brown, shorn of acorns. The spoked wheels turned, sucking, through the ice-glazed puddles, and grated where frost crusted the verges. Only the mourning doves' doleful call fluted through the overcast gloom.

Determinedly buoyant in his muddy clothes, Tarens started to whistle, while Efflin clutched his sore ribs and withdrew, his scowl ingrained as chipped wood. The patience that had been his virtue's mainstay had disappeared with their burned dead. Soon enough, his tense brooding would drop a warm blanket back over his brother's vivacious spirit.

Like Kerelie, Tarens refused to dwell on the problem, that the croft demanded more coin than the land owned. Half of the harvest rotted in the field for the lack of strong hands to wield the scythe and hay rake. The milch-cow in the barn was too aged to breed, which a healthy bull's service to a neighbour's dairy herd might have done something to remedy.

'The pair of you ought to be facing the butcher's knife, and not that savage wretch of a beeve, who should've been culled as a yearling!' The puckered scar on her cheek shadowed under the rim of her pert straw bonnet, Kerelie wrung out the dish-cloth and gave up her effort to dab the stains off her holiday finery. The spatters of meat juice already set, without lye soap and a pail of hot water.

Her grumbled oath made the jaunty tune pause.

'Forget that we never asked for a nurse-maid,' her cheerful brother pointed out, reasonable. 'Are you going to geld me to settle the score?' Tarens liked his risks spicy, though usually not by acting as a shield for star-crossed, recalcitrant livestock.

Efflin risked a baleful glance sideways. 'More of somebody's bloodshed never did gag a woman hell-bent on a scolding.'

'I ought to whack someone's bravado, straight off!' Kerelie shoved a strayed wisp of wheat hair underneath the delicate row of blue flowers stitched into her headscarf. Flushed pink, she gazed fondly at her brothers' broad backs, alike in size and yet so different in demeanour.

Of course, the belligerent idiots behaved as though neither had just hammered the other to pulp with flesh and cracked ribs. Tarens returned a wolf's grin, brazen calm flaunting his innocence, while Efflin goaded the plodding ox with his felt-cap jammed down to his ears. The odd little goat-bell son of a past affectation had tied onto the band gave sweet tongue, belying his sour expression. The tucked feather, sported for the courtship that, somehow, he never found time for, defied the low cloud that

threatened a drizzle.

Kerelie attacked, moved by fierce affection. 'A good thing you bumble-butts have no children hobble the next generation.'

Where Tarens's gleeful insouciance failed, Kerelie's nagging at last lifted Efflin's grim mood: the brothers exchanged pointed glances from equally guileless blue eyes. Having made rueful peace, sore need of distraction from their hitched groans of discomfort, they vied to see which one would ba their sister's flaying tongue first.

'Stubborn? Me?' Efflin snorted. His flicked finger jingled the ridiculous bell, mocking her fir brand common sense. 'I can't take that prize, sweet. Not since the time you kissed the neighbour mule on the muzzle in an attempt to make friends when it bit you.'

'Once!' Kerelie howled. 'I was three years of age!' Would anyone ever mature enough to overlook that blighted mistake?

As Tarens's broad smile renewed the embarrassment, Kerelie slapped his wrist, then masked her rioting blush, bent in half, as a squabble among the crated hens drew her repressive notice. More than one stabbing beak sought to rip the rush baskets and peck holes in the harvested apples. Through shriek meant to shock thieving poultry out of their natural appetite, she buried the branding humiliation: that her face was grotesquely spoiled, no matter how neatly the village healer had stitched her ripped cheek. She cringed to count the grasping suitors lately chased from the door with thrown pots. None of them had trampled the garden-path muddy before Uncle's death left a inheritance.

She would be forced to marry. If her brothers remained too kindly to speak, they must broach the sore subject, and soon. A croft in dire straits for the lack of grown field-hands could not stall for long while she pined for a love match.

'Folly lights up no candles, dear girl,' Efflin soothed, wisely quick to dismiss the mishap that marred her porcelain complexion. 'And Tarens won't sow anyone's moronic by-blow, today. The strumpets will snatch coin for his kisses, up front. Unless, with that toad's mug, he plans to hide his licks at the butcher's?'

'Why would he?' Kerelie shot up straight in offence. 'Most women turn into simpering idiots shown a damned fool with an injury!'

'And you never dote on the lame ducks, yourself? Then I don't smell cinnamon bread in the basket, and we all never noticed how much you loathe baking.' Tarens's snorted laughter transformed to a cough, as her toe poked into his banged ribs. Sobered, not chastised, he ploughed ahead, 'A bashed eye from a bull is no hero's fare.'

'The damaged tomcat better make himself scarce!' Kerelie turned her unmarked cheek and warned, 'Forbye, who said the basket was brought for your sake?'

Tarens laughed, boyish dimples and handsome features rugged with the sunburn peel on his hawk nose. 'Never claimed, did I, that you had good taste.' Sheepish, he ducked Efflin's fraternal cuff and avoided being knocked off the wagon seat.

'You randy louts!' Kerelie shrieked. 'Your manners alone will wreck my last hope of netting a decent husband!'

But Efflin wheezed because he was chuckling. The three of them never could stay at odds for long. 'Doused in beef juice,' he quipped, 'your smell's about right.'

'To impress someone's hog? Good thing, then, we need to,' Tarens said, suddenly serious. As his sister glared back, fair brows pinched with outrage, he winked. 'Lure ourselves a stud pig, that's the issue, directly. Her highness at home's stopped producing.' Owlsh, he added, 'That's been true since

the night Efflin downed uncle's stash of rye whiskey. Did you know he mistook the stall with the cow
I caught him shoved in with the farrow, his lewd mitts busy squeezing the sow's udder.'—————

The chickens were left their free take of the fruit as Kerelie groaned, giggles muffled behind her
chapped palms. She tried not to imagine what might have prompted that odd bout of maudlin
drunkenness.

'Oink,' Tarens gasped, then dodged like a weasel, aware he had earned another black eye from his
brother's punitive fist.

But no trouncing rejoinder hammered him flat.

Efflin was too busy, hauling back on the reins to slow the yoked plod of the ox. Abused leather
harness squeaked in complaint. The trundling wagon slewed in the ruts and jerked the bullock on its
short tether. Through the bucketing creak as stout wood took the strain, the vehicle ground to a stop
just in time to avoid the odd fellow whose aimless stance blocked the roadway.

'Light's grace!' exclaimed Kerelie, above the distressed cackle of upended hens. 'Is this
someone's lost child?'

But the drifting mist unveiled a grown man, mistaken by his slight stature. Back turned, unaware
that his loitering obstructed traffic, he wore a laborer's seedy clothes. The hard-worn cloth had been
repeatedly mended, the original color lost beneath a tattered demalion motley of patches. His stained
knee breeches, napped hose, and holed shoes were dirt-caked, their style beyond recognition. Filthy
hair nested with snapped twigs and leaves hung in snarled hanks to his shoulders.

Efflin's shout did not chase him out of the thoroughfare but raised a flinch that near startled him
out of his skin. His unkempt face turned. An unshaven black tangle of beard buried most of his
features. Not the whites of his eyes, distinct with alarm as he stared in blank shock. Despite his sordid
state of frightful neglect, his manner seemed too confused to be dangerous. His empty hands dangled
unthreatening.

Nonetheless, Efflin reached for the cudgel wedged behind the cart's buckboard.

'That's no marauding bandit.' Tarens's urgent grip on his brother's wrist checked the move to
brandish the weapon.

'You're that sure he's not been sent out as bait?' Brass chinked, as Efflin tipped his hatted head
towards the wood, where late-season briar laced the dense undergrowth, dank with fog, and
impenetrable. 'If that's a tinker, then someone unfriendly's already lifted his pack.'

'Here?' Kerelie scoffed, too riveted to brush out the hen feathers snagged in her sleeve. 'Don't be
a fright-monger!' Astute when it counted, she gestured towards the tipsy stone finials that loomed
through the murk a stone's throw to the left. Those moss-splotched markers were well-known, even
feared, where the overgrown track branched off the trade-route.

Efflin's ruddy face flamed. The site was no place for wise folk to linger. Travellers avoided the
tangled lane, which led into the ancient ruin. Oftentimes, Koriathain practised their uncanny rituals
there. When the enchantresses pitched their silken pavilions amid the tumble-down walls of the
grounds, or if birch smoke rose from the crumbled chimneys, the charcoal men who cut trees for the
kilns did their rough-house drinking in taverns, safe behind Kelsing's brick walls. They spoke of queer
doings in whispers, while the ivied remains of the Second Age hall were reclaimed by the order
sisters. Nobody dared to stray past the wood or till the rich soil of the fallow pastures.

This had been true well before the Light's avatar had tamed the Mistwraith's malevolence. Old
legends held that the place harboured haunts from the days before Mankind settled Athera.

Like most Taerlin crofters, Efflin and his family were blessed for the Light since their birth. They
went out of their way to avoid the wild places where the mysteries were believed to linger. Such

arcane trouble as walked in the world was best left to the dedicate priests. Sound sense suggested the wagon ought to be set rolling at once.

Except the bewildered man in the way displayed no inclination to move.

Efflin shook off his brother's clamped hold. 'Why not make yourself useful? Step down and shift that seedy fellow aside.'

'I say he isn't right in the head.' Tarens flexed his shoulders to mask his uneasiness. Deliberate, and if nonchalant, he arose, ahead of the moment his sister lost patience and fetched him a kick on the backside. He slid to the ground. His solid build should deter anyone's urge to pick a fight or to robbery.

'Don't place undue trust in mild appearances,' Kerelie blurted, concerned.

'Who's the fright-monger, now?' Yet Tarens honoured her anxious prompt and lifted his quarterstaff from the wagon-bed. Step by easy step, as though stalking a poised hare, he closed on the befuddled stranger.

The brazen creature regarded him, motionless. Close up, his eyes were a startling green, brilliant and clear, and focused to a frenetic intensity. Drilled by that keen survey, Tarens felt the bristle of hair at his nape. 'Who are you?' he asked, cautious.

The stranger presented his opened hands. If he understood language, he chose not to answer. His fixated regard never left Tarens's face. Diviners who owned arcane Sight had that look: as though they could read a man, past and present, then project the unwritten course of his fortune and sense his future demise.

'Who are you?' Tarens repeated.

The man's uncanny regard showed him emptiness. As though human speech chased his thoughts beyond desolate, he seemed absorbed by an unseen inner vista that stretched forlorn and unutterably lacking. He might stand on two legs as a man. But the rapt poignancy of his expression suggested he grasped no firm concept by which to define himself, or anything else in the world he inhabited.

Tarens shivered. Distrust dissolved to heart-rending pity, he pronounced in swift reassurance. 'He's a lack-wit.'

The queer fellow listened, head tipped to one side, but without sign of comprehension.

'I mean you no harm,' Tarens added, contrite. 'I only thwap others who cross me, besides. Mostly after my brother hammers me, first.' Aware that his purpled eye lent him a frightening aspect, Tarens slowly shifted the quarterstaff into the crook of his elbow. By nature, he was prepared to be gentle and he eased the odd vagabond clear of the road.

'Any idea where he came from?' Kerelie ventured from her anxious seat in the wagon-bed.

'No.' Tarens grasped the man's ragged shoulder. The unsavoury shirt was too thin for the season and the bony frame, disgracefully underfed. Outraged, he exclaimed, 'Wherever that was, naught can forgive the wrongful fact someone was starving him.'

'We're not hauling a stray!' Efflin bellowed, at once shouted down by Kerelie's protest.

'For shame! Would you turn a blind eye on misfortune? If the man's a simpleton, how can we not show him kindness?'

Efflin grumbled, unmollified, 'You're that sure he's not one of the ungrateful orphans, scarpere from the witches' protection?'

'Nonsense!' Kerelie batted his arm. 'Since when has a boy ward of theirs grown a beard?' Truth disarmed the argument. Koriathain always placed their male charges with an honest apprenticeship before they reached virile manhood.

'Worse,' Efflin persisted, 'we could be caught harbouring one of their order's half-witted'

servants.'

Which cruel guess was the more likely prospect. Rumors and grannies' tales said Koriathain coveted idiots for the brainless service of fetching and carrying. Coin endowments, word held, were awarded for deaf-mutes. Ones unable to read or write could not betray the order's secretive business. 'If that creature's stumbled away from such keepers, we're not safe assisting a runaway.'

Tarens overheard. Susceptible to soft-heartedness, he jumped at fresh cause to brangle with his older brother. 'I wouldn't leave my worst enemy, here!' If his prized bull must be condemned to the knacker's knife, he had never allowed better sense to abet any form of mistreatment. Nor would he stand for the callous abuse of a person luckless enough to be moonstruck.

Efflin understood well enough when to humour his brother's obstinacy. 'Lead the wretch here then. We'll grant him a ride into Kelsing and leave him the coin to buy a hot meal.' He set the brake, resigned, looped the reins, and climbed down to restrain the bull, while Kerelie pulled the latch pin and lowered the tail-board.

If the creature had been a witch's familiar, he stayed docile as Tarens boosted him into the wagon. He curled up by the chicken crates, knees hugged to his chest, soothed by the ponderous rumble of wheels, and contentedly pleased to watch the autumn landscape pass by. When the ox-wain trundled into the sprawling farm market, shadowed beneath Kelsing's walls, he observed with bright eyes. Efflin hauled the ox to a stop. Before Tarens could hitch the draught beast to a rail, the fellow leaped out, saw where he was needed, and with no one's asking, helped Kerelie unload the baskets and poultry. His small size masked an unexpected, fierce strength. He hefted the heaviest crates without difficulty and arranged them as she directed for display and sale.

While Efflin took charge and untied the bull, Tarens dug into his scrip. The last silver left to his name, he placed in the vagabond's hand. Sadness struck him afresh, that the man's nails were dirt-rimed, and his palm, welted over with callus.

Peculiar, how those oddities niggled. Tarens had never heard mention that Koriathain worked the land or kept destitutes for field labor. He shrugged off curiosity, aware by the heat on his back that the risen sun burned through the mist. Already he risked being late to nose-lead the beeve to its fate at the butcher's. Loose half-wits were scarcely his problem, besides. At large in the open market, someone might recognize the mute stranger and claim him.

If not, surely the industrious fellow might find some sort of menial labor in town. Aware he was unwanted, he moved off unasked, to assist an old woman who struggled to lift hampers of yarn from the neighbouring wagon. Diligent as he seemed, the local tavern might hire him to scrub tankards and sweep.

'He will be better off,' Efflin snapped, and dealt Tarens a shove to break his reverie. 'Anything here offers much better prospects than blocking the trade-road for shiftless amusement.'

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