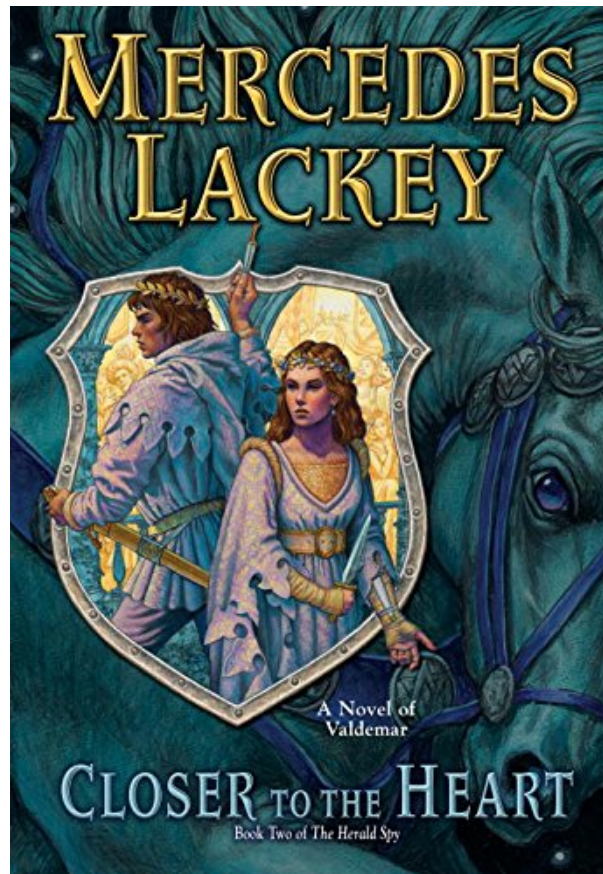
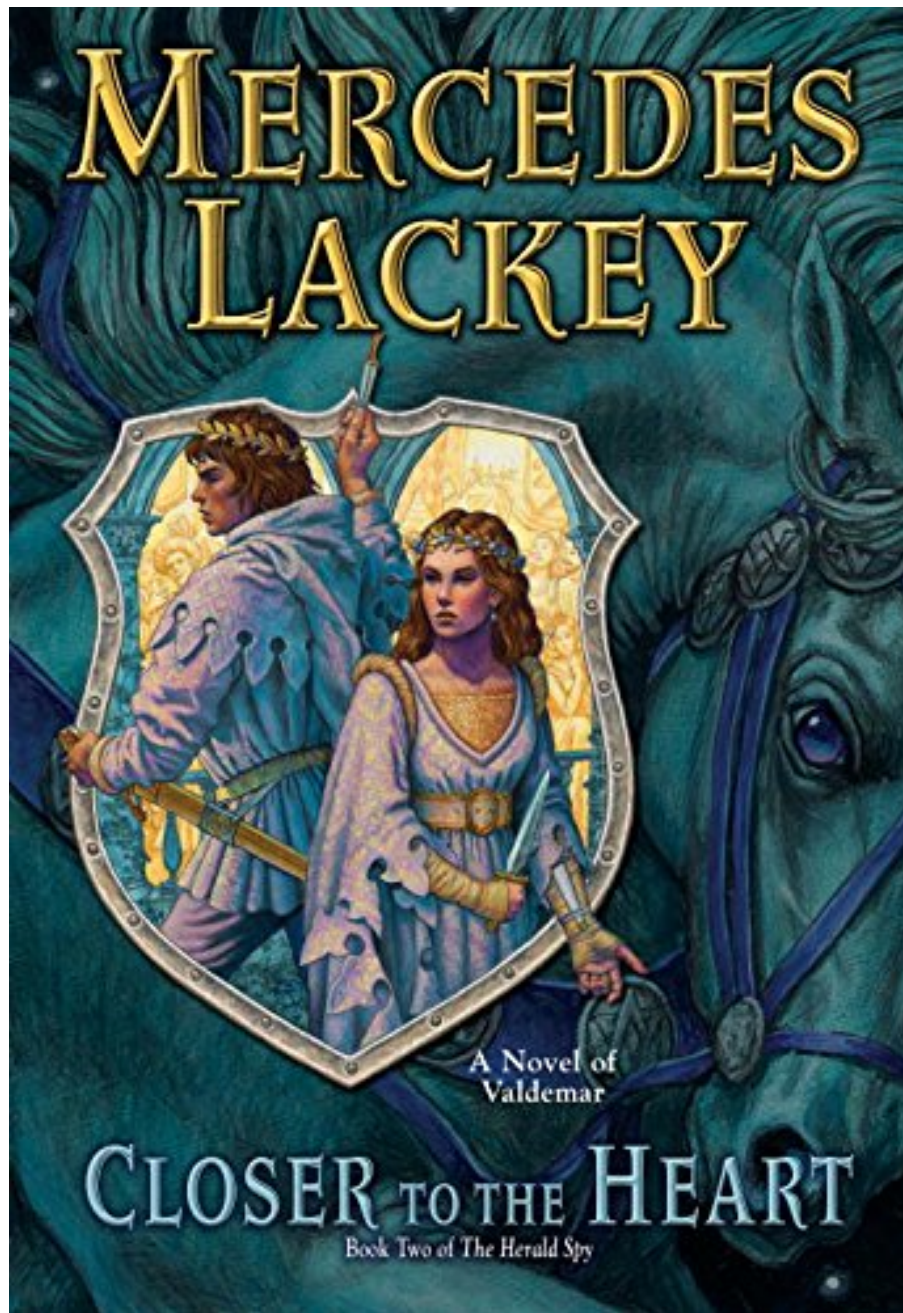


CLOSER TO THE HEART (VALDEMAR: THE HERALD SPY) BY MERCEDES LACKEY



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Review

Praise for The Collegium Chronicles:

“Thanks to court intrigues and an attempt by foreign infiltrators to trick Valdemar to its disadvantage, Lackey makes a real page-turner out of Mags’ and the collegia’s development.” ?Booklist

“For fans of her work, the return to the land of Valdemar and the continued tale of treasured characters will not disappoint?and new readers are likely to become devoted fans. Lackey has a playful writing style that is easy to become engrossed in.” ?RT Book Reviews

“Returning to her beloved Valdemar universe, Lackey opens her new series at a pivotal time in the history of Valdemar.... Series fans will enjoy the variations on a familiar theme, while enough information is presented for first-timers to discover a world of high adventure and individual courage. Highly recommended.” ?Library Journal

“Lackey has effortlessly returned us to the wondrous realm of Valdemar.” ?Night Owl Reviews

“As always, she tells an entertaining and enjoyable tale of Valdemar with characters we love and a world we’ll always want to visit.” ?Pop Culture Beast

“Closer to the Heart has the two things that have always made me love these books: a richly detailed history of the world, and beautiful writing.” —The Arched Doorway

About the Author

Mercedes Lackey is a full-time writer and has published numerous novels and works of short fiction, including the best-selling Heralds of Valdemar series. She is also a professional lyricist and a licensed wild bird rehabilitator. She lives in Oklahoma with her husband, artist Larry Dixon, and their flock of parrots. She can be found at mercedeslackey.com or on Twitter at [@mercedeslackey](https://twitter.com/mercedeslackey).

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Technically, this was spring, but it certainly didn't feel like it. There was a definite bite to the air, and although there was no snow on the ground, the clouds looked as if they were contemplating dropping flakes any moment now. There was no scent of growing things in the air at all, only a vague dampness.

Herald Mags trudged along the street with his arms wrapped around his chest under his tattered cloak—tattered, because he was in disguise, coming to visit his little tribe of spies-in-training, in one of the poorer neighborhoods of Haven. The street was surprisingly smooth, but people did a lot of walking in this part of Haven, and this was also one of the older neighborhoods. There had been a couple hundred years' worth of patient, ill-shod feet wearing down the cobbles.

It was not, by any means, a bad neighborhood. For the most part, folks here were working poor, with honest jobs; the neighborhood itself might have fallen on hard times over the decades, but it hadn't turned into an absolute den of filth and thieves.

That was why the house full of orphans and cast-offs fit right in and caused no curiosity. The only real difference between "Aunty" Minda's houseful of discarded children and every other congregation of cast-offs around here was that Aunty Minda had the financial backing of the Heralds, so that they were guaranteed not to starve, go half-naked, or freeze.

Well, that, and the fact that they were right next to the "Weasel's" pawn-shop, and at the first sight or sound of trouble, one to three very large and heavily armed men would come rushing over from the shop to beat the living daylight out of anyone stupid enough to try and cause the little household grief.

The few people on the street were in just as much of a hurry as he was to get where they were going and into the shelter of four walls. Like him, they strode briskly, heads down, worn and faded clothing bundled tightly around themselves. Unlike him, they'd be fortunate when they got to their destinations to find any sort of a fire going. In this part of town, people generally couldn't afford a lot of fuel; they lit their fires only when they returned from work, and banked them as soon as they were ready to get under the covers in bed.

The street was relatively narrow, and the houses and shops were crowded closely together and on the dilapidated side. Most of them hadn't been repainted in decades, and although they were in repair, you couldn't exactly call it good repair; priority here was on keeping the building standing and the roof sound. After that, the landlords often left it up to the tenants to patch holes and repair shutters. The two- and three-story buildings crowded close together, sometimes leaning a little toward each other like whispering gossips. About half of them had a shop of some sort on the first floor, though many people, especially women, worked out of their homes—doing things like sewing, mending, and laundry. The wind that whipped down the street at him carried some of the scents of that business: cookshop aromas (redolent with the two staples of the poor, cabbage and onions), wet laundry, and beer. It was too late in the day for bread-baking, at least around here. The couple of bakers on this street baked their wares in the very early morning, so it would be ready to buy as people came out of their houses. The common breakfast around here was a hot roll, with a smear of fat, or jam, or for the most prosperous, butter or butter and jam. By this time of the day, the bakeshops were closed, except to serve people who had left their dinners to be cooked for a fee as the ovens slowly cooled. If your hearth was tiny, or you didn't have a hearth, or you lived alone but couldn't afford to eat out of a cookshop every day, that is what you did for dinner. You made up a pot of something and brought it to the baker as you left for work, and picked up your cooked dinner when you returned home. This was not the poorest part of Haven, poor though it was—those streets had the dubious distinction of being around the tanneries; where extremely cheap rents made up for the stinks associated with tanning leather. It

was poor enough that quite often entire families crowded into a single room, or two and even three families shared a flat meant for one. The landlords didn't care how many people you squeezed in, as long as the rent got paid regularly.

Almost no one here owned the flats where they lived, unless they were the shop-owners, living above their shops. Shops in this street tended to stay open for as long as the owner could manage, or find someone to man the counter for him, since people here worked long and irregular hours. It wasn't uncommon to find a young child at the counter of many of these places, the offspring of the owner, learning the work of the business he or she would be inheriting by doing it.

It was only after dark—and in the summertime, well after dark—that these streets became dubious, even dangerous. Once the folks who worked for a living shut themselves behind their doors, the ones that lived in the shadows came out. After dark, when you heard shouts or noises, it didn't pay to be curious, unless you recognized the voice as that of one of the neighbors.

He was glad to reach the converted shop where his little horde of helpers lived, and even gladder to get the door open and pull it tightly shut behind him as a wave of welcome warmth struck him.

He turned and took in the room. He'd had the building gutted when he bought it; since then, he and Minda had taken on so many littles that he'd had a sleeping loft built around all four walls and a staircase to reach it. There were a couple of lamps up there, but nothing else but bedrolls and chests for clothing and trinkets. On the ground floor there were more bedrolls and chests, neatly stowed against the walls. There was only one real bed here, and that was the one reserved for "Aunty" Minda, who tended the children. There was a fireplace at the back of the room, nicely kitted out for cooking, and on either side of it, a row of buckets and basins for washing-up.

Two big kettles hung on hooks over the fire, both of them full of soup. Loaves of bread were waiting, stacked on a table beside the fire. Minda had the fires going briskly and the kettles pulled away from them so the soup didn't burn, as well she should, given the weather. She was virtually alone here at this hour, since her charges were all either at lessons or at work. Most of them were at work; most of them were messengers and delivery runners, installed at various taverns and inns around the city.

Minda was seated on a stool at the side of the hearth, stirring one of the kettles of soup. She rose to greet him; he was pleased to note that regular meals, reliable heat in the winter, rest, and the (relatively) easy work of mothering a brood of youngsters had vastly improved her health. She walked easily now, only slightly favoring knees that had been swollen from years of scrubbing floors. She looked like every other respectable lady around here; maybe cleaner than most, since she was fanatical about cleanliness now that she had the means to enforce it. Her woolen gown and heavy linen undergown were much mended, patched and faded, but not in tatters. Her kindly face was older than her years, but that was the case with just about everyone down here. "All the littles are out, Master Harkon," Minda told him—calling him by the name he used down here, Harkon, nephew of "Willy the Weasel," who owned the pawn shop next door. She knew his real name of course, but no one here used it. Minda called all the youngsters "littles," despite the fact that food and proper care had caused a few of them to sprout so fast they were as tall or taller than she was. And it was about three of those few he had come.

"I got it set up, Aunty," he told her. "Berk, Ray, an' yer li'l Sally'r set up t' go inter service up on th' Hill. I'll come get 'em termorrow, an' next week it'll be Starlin', Kip an' Jo."

Minda sighed, and looked both sad and relieved. "Well, th' bigger lads ain't gettin' th' work as runners so much," she admitted, "now thet they's tall as me. An' we're getting a wee mite crowded here. An' Sally'll be more'n a girl soon, an' ain't no place fer a girly wench here, 'mongst all these boys."

Mags nodded. Having a girl who'd begun to bud woman-bits in a ramshackle "household" full of boys was just asking for trouble. Younglings would go experimenting when urges started, after all. And more likely to go experimenting among friends. "Sally's t'be i' Palace itself. Gonna put her in trainin' as lady's maid, all the airs and suchlike. She'll be mighty handy t'me in a year or so, an' put up in a room full'f other liddle gels in the meantime, so safe as houses. She'll be gittin' a day off ev' fortnight t'run down here an' see ye."

Now Minda sighed with more than relief; she beamed to hear her "daughter" was going to be placed so well—though Mags never had learned if Sally was really Minda's offspring, or someone the woman had just swept up the way a motherly cat will sweep up any kittens left orphaned. Minda would never have been able to dream of the girl going into service in the Palace before Mags had come along. The most she would have hoped for would have been that Sally could find a place in the kitchen of a tavern, or as a serving girl in an inn. And that would have been if she'd been lucky.

"Th' lads 're all gonna be placed as hall-boys 'round the highborn houses. I'll be keepin' good track of 'em, an' I'll get 'em out if they're treated bad. They'll be damn useful, you bet. Hall-boys hear 'bout ever'thin'." Mags was particularly pleased about that. The job of the hall-boy was quite literally to stay in a little cubicle shrouded by a curtain just off the front hall and answer the door so that visitors were never kept waiting more than a few moments. For the extremely wealthy families where he was getting his boys placed, it was a matter of pride to have a hall-boy that did nothing but that, day or night. He answered the door, got names and rank, and ran to get the steward so the visitors could be properly attended to. The hall-boy would know the names, rank, and business of every single person that came visiting, and would certainly be able to pick up pretty much everything in the way of gossip that he cared to.

"Well, nobody could'a ast better nor that," Minda agreed, bobbing her head. "And t'ain't gonna be no harder work than runnin' messages all day." She took his elbow and drew him over to a second stool on the hearth. "Now. Let's hev us a bit uv gossip."

• • •

Minda didn't have a lot of information for him, but Mags hadn't expected too much. Spring was the quiet season, at least until the Spring Fair. The highborn who only came to Court in the Winter were already on their way back to their estates, taking advantage of snow-free roads that were not yet axle-deep in mud due to spring rains. Merchants were busy planning their sales or purchases for the moment the weather turned warm. Farmers were hardest at work; it was already well into lambing season, and soon enough cattle and horses would start dropping babies. Anything that hadn't gotten mended over the winter would have to be put in shape to use once the ground softened enough to plow. Common folk were too busy at this season to get up to much mischief, and it was unlikely that his ears all over the city were going to hear anything. So what he got was a rough litany of minor affairs—what prosperous fellow was sending presents and messages to a lady who was not his wife, what major robberies had taken place and who the likely perpetrator was, who had been seen in places he ought not to be.

He waited until the younglings began trickling in, and gave his chosen half-dozen the good news as they stood in line to wash hands and faces. And they took it as such.

"Oh!" Sally cried, her cheeks turning pink with pleasure. "I am going to be trained for a lady's maid, then! I am so glad!"

Mags grinned; Sally was not only a bright little thing, she'd been making concerted efforts at "bettering" her speech and her manners, drilling herself as well as studying with the Sisters of Nanya, ever since he'd suggested he might be able to get her such a placing.

As for the boys, if their speech was a bit rougher than hers, that wouldn't matter at first; all that was asked of a hall-boy was that he be quick to answer the door, self-effacing, and able to pronounce names and say "yes, milord" or "no, milord," properly. They'd learn.

And all five of them had had occasion to see hall-boys at work, when Mags had sent them to various wealthy houses ostensibly delivering flowers or sweets at Midwinter. It was hard and often long work, since a hall-boy rarely had time off except to eat—but it certainly was easier than spending all day running messages or parcels all over town.

He gave the first three their letters of introduction and the directions to the Palace Gate and the Great Houses where they would present themselves, and drilled them in exactly what they were to say when they turned up at the servant's entrance as near to sunrise as they could manage. When he was satisfied they would make a creditable impression, he patted each of them on the shoulder. "Now, Sally, you're gonna be i' the Palace. I'll be findin' a way t' talk to you about once a week, but if you hear somethin' that's important, you find a way t' get to the kitchen of Herald's Collegium and talk t' the cook. 'E'll get me." As she nodded, he turned to the two boys. "You'll have a harder time gettin' away, so if you hear anythin' I should know, take this—" he handed each of them a ball of red string "—an' tie a piece t' a tree near the servants' door. I'll figger a reason t' come callin' as Herald Mags, and ye kin tell me what you've got then."

"You 'spect us to hear anything, Master Harkon?" Berk asked curiously.

"Honestly? Not really, no," Mags told them. "At least not 'til yer well settled inter your jobs, and they'll give you leave t' take an hour or two for yourselves now an' again, an' a regular day off. But I druther have a plan in place where you kin let me know we need t' talk, than have you learn somethin' then ruin all thet hard work I went to in order t' git you in place by having t' run off straight to me." He clapped both boys on the shoulders. "So concentrate on settlin' in, keepin' yer minds on yer jobs an' not on pretty chambermaids and handsome footmen, an' not getting sacked!"

All three of the youngsters grinned at him, but promised that they would do just that. For his part, Mags felt perfect confidence in them; they'd already shown they were sharp and clever. They were ready for this . . . and Minda was right. The little refuge was beginning to get a bit crowded. It was time for the first of the lot to move on.

And he already had some ideas in mind for the next batch, after these six were safely in place.

He took his leave of all of them, since it was about time for Minda to gather them for supper, and he didn't want to cut into their last hours with their friends. Wrapping his cloak tightly about himself, he left the converted shop and headed back to the inn where he had left Dallen. With the wind at his back, he wasn't quite so cold, and it gave him an excuse to walk briskly rather than sauntering as Harkon would have done in better weather.

Anyone with any sense was inside. This was no weather to linger on the street. Even if you didn't have much fuel and your walls whistled like a flock of birds with leaks, you were still better being inside than out. :Think they'll do all right?: he asked his Companion, as he let the wind push him back up the way he had come.

:Barring accident, they'll do splendidly,: Dallen replied. :And all three of them are quick; even if there is some sort of mishap, they're clever enough to think their way out of it again.:

• • •

Council meetings, Amily had decided, must have been specifically designed to occupy as much time as possible for people who had a great deal of free time to spend. The participants seemed to delight in arguing over minutiae. Maybe things would change once better weather started, but right now the members of the King's Greater Council seemed disinclined to leave their comfortable chairs and the warm Council chamber.

On the other hand, the fact that they could spend entire candlemarks arguing over tiny things like whether the wool from chirras should be taxed at the same rate as wool from sheep or from lambs meant that things were . . . safe. Or relatively so. So. Small blessings. There was no war, not even rumors of war. Banditry was at a level where the local Guard garrisons could handle it.

After the near-riots at Midwinter, caused by the feud between the noble Houses of Raeylen and Chendlar, even perpetually disputing highborn families were keeping their quarrels confined to vicious gossip and cutting remarks. Street-brawls and threats of exile by the King had made their due impression on other feuding families, but what had really sent shock rippling through the Court was that the son of Lord Kaltar of House Raeylen had very nearly carried out a plot to murder all but one of the members of both Houses, marry the Chendlar girl, and inherit the lot. With all that to occupy them, most people were still chewing over the gossip-fodder.

And there were no more mysterious assassins sent by Karse scattered about the city. Large blessings.

"Perhaps," she said gently, although she got their immediate attention when she spoke, "We should be looking at how rare this wool is, compared with mature sheep's wool or lambswool, and tax it accordingly."

She looked around at the circular table—circular, so that every member of the Greater Council could easily look into the faces of every other member, and no one could claim he or she had anything but an equal seat. All the faces that met hers wore relatively contented expressions, cementing her notion that the Councilors were mostly "arguing" for the sake of argument, and being in not-unpleasant company while being served the King's best wine and manchet breads flavored with rose water. Not a bad way to spend a bitter afternoon.

"But what if the market becomes depressed by an excessive tax?" someone demanded, and they were off and running again, but this time at least the argument was getting somewhere instead of being an endless circle.

She was more than a bit gratified—who wouldn't be—that now she was taken seriously in the Council meetings. Or seriously enough that when she spoke up, what she said was given due consideration. She'd been afraid that it would take years before she got even a fraction of the respect the Council had given her father.

Maybe the office of King's Own Herald by itself brought along a basic level of respect.

:Or perhaps,: Rolan said gently into her mind, :They've been paying attention on the rare occasions when you speak up, and have learned that when you do say something, it's worth listening to.:

:Or both,: she replied, successfully keeping herself from blushing. She wondered if her father had gotten this sort of encouragement from Rolan when he first became King's Own.

It had been a long day, and she was just as glad that there was not an official Court dinner tonight. Kyril had made it quite plain that he intended to dine in his quarters with his family, which meant that only about half the members of the Court who were in residence would take dinner in the Great Hall. Those would be the members of the Court who had no residences of their own. The rest would return to their own fine townhouses here on the Hill for dinner, and possibly to entertain or be entertained. There could be music, informal dancing, and gaming. That meant she was free to have dinner with Mags, and they would probably do so

with the instructors at the Collegium. The King only had Court dinners about once a week, although the Crown Prince and Princess, Sedric and Lydia, presided at Court dinners roughly three times as often. Lydia had told Amily that they did so in order to take the burden off Kyril, who frankly loathed the long dinners even more than he disliked tedious Council sessions. She couldn't blame him. The Great Hall was huge, people had to talk so loudly in order to be heard that everything was a babble, and even with the best will in the world, not every dish arrived at the tables better than lukewarm. It had occurred to her, more than once lately, that Kyril was looking . . . older. Not old, but older. The office was wearing on him.

While Father is actually looking younger. No longer having to juggle the dual duties of King's Spy and King's Own, now that he had completely recovered from what could only be described as "returning from the dead," Amily's father Herald Nikolas seemed to her to be reveling in the chance to get away from the Court and do things.

I certainly can't blame him.

On the other hand, these Council sessions were a unique opportunity for her to learn a great deal about the individual members of the Council. As long as she remained quiet, they tended to treat her as part of the furniture. It wasn't that they ignored her, it was more that they were used to her father, who had a very powerful Gift of Mindspeech, and could tender his advice to Kyril silently. They probably assumed she was doing the same, and it suited both her and the King to allow them to continue with that impression. Thus far she hadn't uttered so much as a single word during Council sessions that would make any of the members think she was challenging them, or even observing them with any attitude other than respect for their age and experience.

Which, of course, she was . . . but she was also weighing everything they said against what she knew were their own personal agendas and interests. Cynical perhaps, but Amily was a realist, and she had been observing these selfsame personages for years at the behest of her father, back when she was nothing more than quiet, unremarkable Amily, Herald Nikolas's crippled daughter, of no consequence whatsoever. Yes, they were all experienced. But they were also seasoned politicians and courtiers, and all of them had left defeated rivals in their wake. Now, they wouldn't be on the Council if the King and the Heralds didn't think they would keep the welfare of the Kingdom foremost in their minds. But there was no doubt that the continued accumulation of wealth and power lurked in the background whenever they came to a decision. As long as there was no conflict between these two motivations, Amily held her tongue. But she was always on the watch for a moment when the latter edged out the former.

Today had been one of those days. They all had commercial interests, whether it be mercantile or agricultural, or a combination of both, and edging the taxes one way or another could shift the balance of wealth and power around this table and around the Kingdom. It had been like watching people playing a card game for very high stakes.

The Crown Prince and Princess had sat in on this meeting as well, although they had not contributed anything to the discussion. She could tell from their expressions, however, that neither of them missed a thing—and it was very likely that tonight, at dinner in the Royal Suite, this entire meeting would be hashed out again between the soup and the dessert.

She was just as glad not to be a part of that. Going through it once was enough. Prince Sedric seemed to take a great deal of pleasure in this game of politics, though, and for that she was grateful. When—as she fully expected—the King stepped aside to allow his son to become the reigning Monarch, she was not going to have to educate him in a thing.

Nor Lydia, either. Like Amily, Lydia had been playing the quiet, unassuming observer at the behest of her

elders—in this case, her Uncle—for many years. If Sedric knew the highborn players in this game intimately, then it was Lydia who knew the merchant “princes.” Together they were going to make a formidable team.

And thank the gods for the greater favors. That barring a tragedy, we’re going to get a pair like Lydia and Sedric as our monarchs when the time comes, and not a child.

That was the current situation in Menmellith, a Kingdom near Valdemar’s southern border. The situation had been so precarious, in fact, that Menmellith had not sent an ambassador to Sedric and Lydia’s wedding.

This, among other reasons, was why Kyril was pressing Amily and Mags to have their wedding soon. He wanted to make a state occasion of it, so that those foreign lands who had not sent a representative to the Crown Prince’s wedding would have a second chance with a lot less international political pressure attached to the ceremony.

Politics. We can’t even escape them when it comes to our personal lives. She sighed internally. Evidently, once one is King’s Own, one doesn’t actually have a personal life. No wonder father seems younger. I think I’m taking on all the years he shed.

• • •

Mags and Amily both ended up at the Collegium dining hall late—so late that they missed all their friends and the instructors, and there weren’t more than a handful of Trainees still there. He glanced over at her, thinking how serene and simply pretty she looked in her Formal Whites, and how deceptively unthreatening. She could have been any highborn girl; brown hair neatly braided and pinned around her head, big, soft brown eyes, delicate face—

—and he had seen her kill men, taking carefully placed, precise arrow shots. Not that he hadn’t killed his share, and more, but he didn’t look harmless, the way she did. He wondered if any of the Councilors ever thought of that, when they faced her across the table.

“Well, at least there ain’t a crowd,” he said, watching the few Trainees desperately trying to combine eating and studying, and the Trainees on kitchen duty bustling about cleaning up. “We can always beg at the kitchen hatch for some crumbs.”

But they hadn’t even picked a spot to sit before the Cook sent someone out with loaded trays for both of them.

Mags grinned and thanked the Trainee who handed them their dinners. “Bless you and Cook, and tell him I said so,” Amily added, and they took their food and found an out-of-the-way spot to enjoy their dinner in peace. One near the fireplace, and away from the windows. The ruddy light of sunset was not improving the bleak lawns and gardens outside.

“This weren’t—wasn’t—ever Collegium dinner,” Mags remarked, looking at the succulent roast pork, baked apples, and fancy-cut mixed vegetables. Not to mention the little pastries shaped like swans and filled with whipped cream with dollops of jam on top. The food looked and smelled heavenly.

“No, tonight was supposed to be stew,” Amily told him. “This is what went on the plates over at the Great Hall.” Then she considered the plates. “Part of what went on plates at the Great Hall,” she amended, and shook her head. “I should be used to it by now, but I still find it difficult to contemplate dinners that consist of a dozen courses or more. Our people make sure that nothing goes to waste, but the sort of excess that the highborn expect to see as a meal still bothers me.”

"I spent most've my life half-starved," Mags reminded her. "I try not t'think on it too much or it'll make me mad. What goes back t'the kitchen after one Court meal'd feed all the mine-kids fer a month." He shook his head, and dug in. "I expect the Cook sent over for a couple of plates and kept them warm for us."

"Sometimes I suspect Cook of having a Foresight Gift." The two of them ate silently for a bit; it had been a long day for both of them, Mags suspected, although his had at least been spent in doing constructive things rather than sitting around a table and listening to Councilors argue.

Speaking of which. . . .

"I had me an idea," he said, contemplating his pastry swan. It really did look too pretty to eat.

"Oh?" Amily clearly had no such reservations about her swan. She lifted it carefully to her lips and bit the head off. She looks so sweet, like a little brown coney, all big eyes and soft hair. And then she bites the heads off things . . .

Which, of course, made them perfect for each other. Just like his cousin Bey and his little assassin-trained wife.

:Dallen . . . sometimes I think I might be more like Bey than I'd like to think.:

:And this is bad, how?: Dallen replied archly.

:Point.:

"Well . . . you know how they're tryin' t'make a big thing over the weddin'. An' you know how our lives go. An' the chance fer a whole lotta things t'go wrong on the way is pretty high . . ." He raised an eyebrow at her; she sighed and nodded, and nibbled pastry.

"So, it occurs t'me . . . why not just run off some afternoon, an get married? You, me an' yer pa so's he don't feel left out. We just won't tell anyone else. That way, if ev'thing does go sideways, we'll be married already anyway." He looked at her expectantly. "Whatcha think?"

She stared at him for a moment. "I think it's very clever!" she replied, much to his relief. "And I am all in favor of this plan!" She finished her swan thoughtfully. "The best thing is if we just wait until we both have several candlemarks free at the same time, rather than planning, because you know if we try to plan this, something will go wrong."

"That's a fact," Mags agreed. "I'm mighty glad you think this's a good idea."

She smiled, which quite transformed her face from "quiet" to "lovely." "I don't think it's a good idea. I think it is a great idea. Maybe I will stop having nightmares about things going wrong." Then she made a little face. "Mind you, thinking of second-chance plans is much more entertaining than most Council meetings."

He laughed. "Well, don't let them know that. Oh, I got my young'uns coming up in the mornin'."

She gave him a little sideways smile. "So, you insinuate your little spies in amongst the unwary then?"

"Better'n tryin' to be twenty places at once, like your Pa did," he observed. "Now, I know why he done things that way, but the way I figure it, when I start out with the young'uns, I know they're gonna be loyal to me once they've growed up. So I don' need to go huntin' about for servants I can trust."

She nodded. “And he never could devote more than half of his time to either job.”

“Too right.”

The Trainee who’d served them took away their empty plates while they sat together and discussed the business of the day—or at least as much of it as either of them was willing to talk about in such a public place. Finally it dawned on both of them that they could do this much more comfortably and privately back in the quarters Amily occupied that had once been Bear’s.

The walk to Healers’ Collegium was more than a bit chilly, and the warmth of the hothouse that Amily was responsible for came as a relief. And it just seemed silly not to take the conversation to the most comfortable spot in the suite of rooms and then one thing led to another, and there wasn’t much talking getting done for a goodly while.

“So . . . anythin’ I really need t’know ’bout?” Mags asked into the soft dark.

Amily settled her head on his shoulder, and he pulled the blankets up closer around both of them. There was a very little light from the glowing coals of their fire, their featherbed felt very good after a day of walking all over Haven, having Amily cuddled in his arms was all he could have wished for and he would have been quite happy to never move again. Which, of course, was impossible, but it was a very nice thought.

“Kyril wants the wedding to be just after the Spring Fair.” She sighed. He understood. She hadn’t wanted their wedding to be turned into a spectacle in the first place, and having it right after the Spring Fair made him suspect the King planned to make use of some of the entertainers that would arrive for it. Then he sensed her smile. “But it won’t be our wedding, will it? Just a kind of pageant where we are the chief actors. Meaningless, really.”

He chuckled. “Ayup. An’ we’ll get all dressed up an’ say our lines, an’ if th’ thing falls apart ’cause my cousin decides t’pay a visit, it won’t matter a bit.”

She laughed. “That’s the spirit!” Then she stiffened. “You don’t think Bey is—”

“No. Besides I ain’t invitin’ him.” He mulled the situation over. “So, walk me through th’ reasons.”

“Kyril wants to make this another reason for gathering in important people in the Kingdom and ambassadors. Of course, Sedric’s wedding was an occasion for that, but they were all rather preoccupied with it, and not with politics and negotiation and maneuvering. Plus, I wasn’t King’s Own then. That’s the next reason, Kyril wants outsiders to think of me as innocuous. With attention fixed on me as a bride, people are more likely to dismiss me as not as sharp as my father. They’ll underestimate me. The only people who need to understand just how sharp I am are the ones on the Council, but for anyone else, it could be very advantageous for me to be overlooked.”

The fire popped a little, as Mags mulled all that over. He nodded thoughtfully. “That’s all good reasons. Gotta agree with ’em. Even if I don’ much like bein’ trotted out an’ put on show.”

“Kyril had reasons for that, too. This is a good time for you to continue to create the impression you’re good-hearted, solid, dependable, and a bit thick,” she pointed out, and he had to laugh, because that was exactly what Nikolas had told him to do, back when he began learning the same craft that had made Nikolas the King’s Spy.

“So I’m a bit thick, an’ you’re just a pretty thing at the King’s side. Well, don’ we make a likely pair!” He

laughed harder as she gave a most unladylike snort.

“The more I think about running off and making the vows before a priest, the better I like the idea,” she said after a while, just as he was drifting off to sleep. “The sooner, the better.”

“Aight,” he agreed, and drifted away.

In the morning, Amily was already gone when Mags finally crawled up out of sleep. His dreams had been full of wedding nonsense—not nightmares, and not of things going wrong, but of nonsensical stuff. Like the King insisting that he and Amily get married on a platform built in a tree, or of Amily’s dress somehow being made entirely of bees. He couldn’t quite make out what had triggered that image.

Or Bey and roughly a hundred assassins turning up at the last minute to outline them in thrown knives as they kissed.

As he dressed, then made his way to the Collegium and ate, it occurred to him that he was not entirely happy with the King’s plan. The Spring Fair was not all that far away, and if the King intended to make some sort of enormous political and diplomatic event out of it, there wasn’t a great deal of time to get everything ready. . . .

He spooned up oatmeal loaded with chopped nuts and drizzled with honey, and considered all his options. Now, granted, Spring wasn’t a bad choice for this thing. After all, no one ever went to war in the Spring, or almost never. Spring warfare meant pulling your people away from their fields and flocks at the worst possible time. It meant that the area where you were fighting would be utterly ruined; fields trampled before seeds even had a chance to sprout, calving, foaling and lambing disrupted—and you’d have the devil’s own time trying to move herds with pregnant females and young animals out of harm’s way quickly. You went to war in the Spring and you insured that part of the country would starve, so unless that was actually your goal . . . it was a monumentally stupid idea, one that gained you nothing. If you lost, the local populace would descend on your country in an orgy of desperate looting in order to make up for their lands being ruined. If you won, you’d have to support a starving population.

And that didn’t even touch on trying to march and move and fight in mud, because the combination of Spring rains and newly plowed fields meant you would be up to your knees in mud. And so would your supply trains.

But Prince Sedric’s wedding had taken nearly a year to prepare, and even if this wasn’t going to be as elaborate, how would they ever have the time to get it all ready?

:You won’t,: Dallen admonished him. :The King wants this; the King will do the arranging, or rather, delegate people to make the arrangements for him. Remember what you and Amily agreed on last night; neither of you are under any obligation to concoct a “perfect wedding” for each other. It’s a show; just do your parts and let other people worry about doing theirs.:

:And if it all falls apart?: Mags could not help asking, although with a wry cast to his thoughts.

:Then as players ever and always do, we all blame the director. Who will probably be Lady Dia.:

Mags thought of that, as he got a plate of bacon and eggs and bolted it down. :I’d rather not. Lady Dia can be very . . . fierce.:

He had an appointment to meet Nikolas down at the shop, in their guises of Harkon and Willy the Weasel. The Weasel rarely put his head in at the shop anymore; it was understood that he was leaving the bulk of the work to his nephew and his nephew's hired toughs, but it would have been altogether out of character for him to stay away entirely. Although the shop did the bulk of its business after dark, it was the Weasel's way to open it for a few hours in the morning, so that men who'd pawned their tools and had the money to redeem them could do so before hurrying off to a job.

This meant subterfuge, of course. Mags went down into Haven as a Herald, and left Dallen at the stables at a Guard post. Then he left the post by means of a tunnel under the street, and emerged in a back room at a tavern, where he became Harkon. Harkon staggered out, giving a convincing imitation of a man who had been drinking all night and needed to sober himself up before facing his uncle—stopping at a cookshop for a mug of tea so strong the spoon should have melted, at another for a second, not quite as strong, and at an apothecary for a dose of his “Sovereign Remedy.” By the time he got to the pawn shop, he was apparently sober enough to evade the Weasel's wrath.

The shop was already open, and as Mags entered, a fellow in a carpenter's apron was just finishing redeeming his tools. The man hurried out with a nod to the “nephew,” as Nikolas—aka “Willy the Weasel”—grunted and unlocked the door into the protected part of the shop.

Even if you had known that “Willy the Weasel” was the same person as Herald Nikolas, it would have taken a trained eye to see the Herald in the pawnshop owner. The Weasel's greasy, graying hair straggled down his back in a most untidy manner, he had an unattractive squint, and his mouth was always primmed up tightly, as if he was afraid to give away so much as a word. If anything, the Weasel was very memorable, as opposed to Herald Nikolas, who was so very ordinary that if it had not been for his Heraldic Whites, he would have faded into the background of any crowd.

The shop was really two rooms; the front part held the bulkier, heavier, or more inexpensive items on shelves all around it; the back part, behind a wall so sturdy it could have been a jail cell, had a locked door and a barred window, through which the pawnbrokers conducted their business. That part of the shop held all the valuable stuff, and, of course, the cashbox.

“See, Stef turned up like 'e promised, nuncle,” Mags said, locking the door behind him and taking Nikolas's place on the stool so that the “Weasel” could drop into a far more comfortable chair that stood behind it. :Have you been told about the circus we're to put on?:

“Le's 'ope 'is work's more reliable this time,” Nikolas growled. “E's got 'alf 'is 'ousehold on our shelves. I'd be best pleased t'clear 'is trash out.” :I had breakfast with Kyril, so yes.: Nikolas shook his head imperceptibly. :I can't make up my mind if it's the idea of a genius or a disaster in the making.:

“Could use th' space,” Mags agreed, carefully counting out the money in the drawer under the counter. This was routine. Every time someone new took over the window, he was supposed to count the money. :Amily and I decided last night that we aren't taking any chances. We're going to pop off quietly to a priest when we both have a free morning or an afternoon and just do the thing. We know half a dozen holy folk who'd tie the knot for us without a second thought, and neither of us care much who is the deity in charge. That way, when the disaster looms, at least we'll already be shackled and it won't matter to us if the thing falls apart, or gets stormed out of existence, or gets raided by bandits . . . or any of a thousand other things goes wrong.:

Nikolas blinked at him blankly for a moment, then covered it by half-lidding his eyes and tucking his chin down as if he was about to take a nap. :I take back everything I ever said about you being an idiot,: he replied, with a mental chuckle. :Am I invited?:

:How could I dare say no? I'm not anxious to be knifed in the dark by my father-in-law.:

A very faint chuckle emerged from the “drowsing” Nikolas. It sounded enough like a hint of a snore to pass for one. :Definitely not an idiot. I approve. And I take it we keep this a little secret amongst the six of us?: Nikolas had included the three Companions, of course. It wouldn't exactly be possible to keep something like this a secret from them.

:It wouldn't do to disappoint Lady Dia and Princess Lydia,: Mags agreed. :Better to let them bask in the illusion that they're creating a perfect wedding for us. They'll probably wallow in it, actually.:

Nikolas chuckled again. :Considering that Amily's mother and I essentially did the same thing as you plan to—running off to a priest to avoid the hash that our two mothers were making, arguing over every detail, you are upholding a fine tradition.:

:Good to know. And speaking of “knowing,” what is it I need to hear?:

Mags spent the rest of his candelmarks, right up until midmorning (when the Weasel declared that keeping the shop open until “the lads” turned up to take it over after dark was a waste of time), trading information with his mentor. None of it was terribly important, but any part of it could become important. One thing Mags had learned above all else; when it came to being the King's Spy, the most unexpected things could turn out to be relevant.

As he and Nikolas locked up the shop, he saw Nikolas's head cock in that odd way that let him know that Evroy was speaking to him. And at nearly that same moment, Dallen chuckled.

:Be careful what you ask for,: Dallen said. :You might get it. The King cut short the Lesser Court in order to see to some detail of the Treasury. Amily is free. You are free. Nikolas is free. And Brother Elban just down the street is tending his garden and is essentially free and of all the people you know who would do this thing, Brother Elban is your favorite. So. Would you like to get married?:

•••

It was with a feeling of profound relief that Mags kissed his bride under the combined (beaming) gazes of his new father-in-law, Brother Elban, Healer and tender of the little Shrine of Alia of the Birds, and three Companions.

He actually could not have planned this better. Everything had conspired to be perfect.

Elban was a lone cleric at his little Shrine; he didn't need much, just a room to live in and his garden. Alia of the Birds was a very minor Goddess, as such things went, with a tiny congregation and no real rituals of Her own. Her clerics were solitary, but not hermits; they dedicated their lives to healing and teaching the poorest of the poor. Several of Mags' youngsters took lessons with him. The Shrine occupied the same footprint as any of the houses or shops in this area; it consisted of a walled garden mostly planted with healing herbs, with Elban's little living quarters at the back. The walls of the garden and the dwelling were pleasantly weathered stone, a soft, pinkish granite. The statue of Alia, a motherly looking lady of middle age, with a round, smiling face and carved and real birds perched all over her, was made of a similar stone.

Within the shelter of the Shrine's walls, true spring had come early to Brother Elban's garden, lilies bloomed at the foot of Alia's statue, and the birds perched in the vines on the wall provided all the music they needed. He and Nikolas had detoured just enough to resume their identities as Heralds before meeting Amily here.

And the deed was done. They'd managed to get married without anything going wrong or interfering. Mags had never heard the wedding ceremony as performed by Alia's clergy before, but it had been lovely.

Now you will feel no rain, for each of you will be shelter for the other.

Now you will feel no cold, for each of you will be warmth to the other.

Now there will be no loneliness, for each of you will be companion to the other.

Now you are two persons, but there is only one life before you.

Treat yourselves and each other with respect, and remind yourselves often of what brought you together. Give the highest priority to the tenderness, gentleness and kindness that your connection deserves. When frustration, difficulties and fear assail your relationship, as they threaten all relationships at one time or another, remember to focus on what is right between you, not only the part which seems wrong. In this way, you can ride out the storms when clouds hide the face of the sun in your lives—remembering that even if you lose sight of it for a moment, the sun is still there. And if each of you takes responsibility for the quality of your life together, it will be marked by abundance and delight.

“Now, remember,” Nikolas reminded the beaming cleric. “Unless it is vital, no one is to know they are already wed.”

“Oh no, it would disappoint all those people who are likely planning a spectacle,” the thin little fellow replied, bobbing his head with understanding. He had no special robes; Alia's clergy wore nothing more ostentatious than a long, brown tunic and treads, with a leather bird sewn over the heart. “No, we cannot possibly have that. It is not every day that the King's Own gets married. People have expectations and we shouldn't deny them their holiday, now, should we?” Then he beamed at them. “It will be our little secret.”

He let them out the garden gate, and Amily immediately swung herself up onto Rolan's back. “I—”

“—have t' get up the Hill, I know,” Mags finished for her. “Go. I'll see ye at dinner if not afore. I got law-court this afternoon.”

“Don't starve yourself,” was all she said, and then she and Rolan were trotting up the street and rounded the corner.

Mags looked to his mentor. Nikolas nodded in the general direction of a cookshop they both favored, and Mags grinned in agreement. He felt positively euphoric, actually, now that everything was settled. A weight had very much fallen from his shoulders, and it looked as if Nikolas felt exactly the same.

The explanation for that came only when they had finished their meal and were about to part company, with Mags going on to the law-court, and Nikolas to whatever mysterious errand would occupy him this afternoon. “Now if something takes me out of Haven, it won't matter,” Nikolas sighed.

Mags nodded. “That be true,” he replied. “If somethin' had called ye away afore the circus, Amily'd've been . . .” He groped for words.

“Very sad. Absolutely understanding, but very sad.” Nikolas's normally inexpressive face took on a melancholy cast for a moment. “I have had to miss too many of the important moments of her life. I am glad I did not have to miss this one.”

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Nikolas did not say where he was going, and Mags didn't ask. This was not because they were ignoring the one cardinal rule of their occupation, which was always make sure someone knows where you will be. It was because Dallen had already spoken to Evory, and Dallen knew where Nikolas was headed. So that made two other creatures that knew exactly where Nikolas was going and what he intended to do, and that was enough.

Mags had quite enough on his plate with attending the Law Court; he didn't need to start fretting about whatever possibly dangerous place Nikolas was going to go.

Any Herald who was not already teaching at the Collegium—and truly, what was Mags actually qualified to teach?—was assigned to the Law Courts in various parts of the city. Prince Sedric was assigned to the Court Royal, which tried all cases that the lesser Courts passed to the higher, or those cases that were appealed. Not that many cases were appealed, because before one could appeal a case, all parties involved had to agree to re-testifying under Truth Spell in the Lesser Court. And was where Mags and the others came in, because in order to set the Truth Spell, you needed a Herald.

Mostly the Heralds of the Law Courts merely had to be present; a constant reminder that if the parties on either side or the judge demanded it, the Herald in attendance could set Truth Spell on any witness. Not the coercive version—although Mags could do that. Generally the coercive version of the Truth Spell was not needed in these simple trials.

This particular Court was in the same district as Willy the Weasel's pawn shop; the Guard and the City Watch here all knew Mags both in his guise of Harkon and as Herald Mags. That was useful, since they could arrange for trials where Harkon might be called in to identify someone who had pawned something to take place when Herald Mags was off-duty and some other Herald was taking his place.

Like most of the district, the courtroom and the building it was in had seen better days. Meticulously repaired and scrupulously cleaned, nevertheless, everything was old, worn, and a bit shabby. There were six benches for onlookers and witnesses, a table and bench each for the accuser and the accused, and at the front facing the rest, the judge's bench and the witness box. Then there was Mags' seat, at the back of the courtroom, off with the bailiff and a couple of Guards and a couple of members of the Watch who made sure things didn't get out of hand. The walls were whitewashed plaster . . . just a bit dingy. The furnishings were all dark wood that had long ago lost any semblance of polish.

Mostly, to tell the truth, Mags was just there for show, to remind the witnesses that they could lie under oath, but if they were challenged, they'd be caught at it, and might be in as much trouble, if not more, than the accused.

The courtroom was empty when he entered it, except for the bailiff, who greeted him like the old friend that he was by now, and offered him a mug of hot cider. Mags accepted it gratefully. The courtroom was cold and damp, and he kept his cloak on, as did the bailiff. There were fireplaces in the building, but none in this room.

"Seems like Spring ain't never gonna come," Bailiff Creed said, blowing on his cider before taking a sip.

"Seems like it's comin' too soon, iff'n ye ast me," Mags replied. "King wants me an' Amily leg-shackled after Spring Fair." He said this with a sigh, though inwardly he was chuckling. There was no time like the present to get the rumor-mill going. The less the general public knew about how things really stood between him and Amily, the better.

"Criminy! No more tom-cattin' 'bout fer you, me lad!" said the bailiff (who was, of course, married; the King encouraged marriage among the Watch and those of the Guard who were posted within the city as he

felt it encouraged stability). Creed laughed, not unkindly. “Not that I ever heerd all that much ’bout you kickin’ up yer heels.”

Because I am very careful that my visits to my eyes and ears at the brothels are done by Harkon or some other rake-hell. “Nah, an’ truth is, it ain’t the bein’ married, it’s the mort’ve fuss an’ feather of gettin’ married I ain’t lookin’ forrard to,” Mags replied mournfully. “On’y good thing ’bout it is, I’m orphant, an’ Amily’s on’y got her Pa, so at least we ain’t got two Mamas fightin’ over weddin’ thins.”

“But she’ll have a mort’ve friends makin’ hay over this, you mark my words,” Creed replied. “You’re in for it, m’lad. Just smile an’ nod an’ say ever’tthin’ looks bootiful. An’ if it’s costly, make sure th’ King’s a-payin’ for it.” And at that moment, the Court began to fill up, which meant they both had to be on best behavior.

The first several cases were either quite clear-cut (the Watch having caught someone in the act of theft or mayhem)—or boring (quarrels between neighbors that had gotten to the point of being brought before the Court).

Then something came up that made both Mags and Creed sit up and start paying attention.

The first hint that matters were out of the ordinary was that a parade of five people trudged into the courtroom and took seats on the witness bench.

Then an enormous man was brought into the dock in irons that looked like dainty bracelets on his massive wrists. He was incredibly muscular, with muscles like a stonecutter or a blacksmith, taller than both the Watch that were with him, coarse features and a bald pate. And yet, the man’s expression and body language were that of a terrified child.

The man’s accuser came into the Court, and Mags took an instant dislike to him. Mags could read both his body language and his surface thoughts, and what he read proclaimed this “Cobber Pellen” to be a bully and a liar. He looked as if he was someone who was accustomed to take what he wanted from those who were weaker than he was. Once he had been muscular, but now he was going to fat, with a round head and features that could have been considered handsome, except for the petulance of the mouth and the ugly glitter of his eyes. Both accuser and accused were positioned in front of the judge, and the accuser was the first to speak, according to the rules.

“This animal attacked me without no reason yer Honor!” Pellen proclaimed. “It shoulda never been ’llowed on the streets! It shoulda been locked up years ago! It’s dangerous! It nearly broke my arm!”

All the while Pellen was proclaiming how “dangerous” the huge fellow was, all the man did was cower—which was a strange thing to see from someone who looked as if he earned his living by throwing rowdies out of taverns. But all that Mags could sense was fear . . . fear, and confusion.

“And have you any witnesses?” the judge began, when he was interrupted by a shout from a ragged young woman who pushed her way into the court. Mags didn’t get more than an impression of a wild mop of curly brown hair, a whirlwind of ragged skirts and shawls, and clenched fists, before she was already at the front of the courtroom.

“Cobber Pellen’s a damn liar!” the woman shouted, and launched herself at him as if she was going to tear him to pieces with her bare hands. And the court erupted into chaos, with the Watch intervening between them, Cobber Pellen shouting one thing, the young woman shouting another, the five on the witness bench making a hasty exit from the room, and the bailiff trying to subdue Cobber as one of the Watch tried to

subdue the woman.

Mags considered wading in himself, but decided instead to keep an eye on the accused.

Who was huddling in the corner, looking as if he was going to cry at any moment. There was something very odd going on here. The surface thoughts of the poor fellow were in chaos, and it was as if every single thought had to fight its way through treacle to come to the surface. It took Mags a moment to figure what was going on, and by then the bailiff and the Watch had separated the combatants and put them on opposite sides of the courtroom.

The judge looked on with a neutral expression, but then, he was used to eruptions in the courtroom. This was not a neighborhood where people came meekly into the court and calmly dealt with their side of an issue. It was only the first time this week that a brawl had interrupted things here, and there were still four days to go before the week was over.

By that point, Mags had gone from confusion to pity, because it was clear that the accused man was not at all right in the head. Whether he was born that way, or had been injured, he was, frankly, not fit to stand trial. But before he could intervene, the judge had leveled his gaze on Pellen.

“Cobber Pellen,” the judge said. “Where are your witnesses to this so-called attack?” The judge raised an eyebrow. “Because frankly, right now the man you say tried to harm you is acting more like the one who’s been beaten rather than the one doing the beating.”

CLOSER TO THE HEART (VALDEMAR: THE HERALD SPY) BY MERCEDES LACKEY PDF

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CLOSER TO THE HEART (VALDEMAR: THE HERALD SPY)

BY MERCEDES LACKEY PDF

New York Times-bestselling author Mercedes Lackey's Herald Spy series, set in the beloved fantasy world of Valdemar

Herald Mags, Valdemar's first official Herald Spy, is well on his way to establishing a coterie of young informants, not only on the streets of Haven, but in the kitchens and Great Halls of the highborn and wealthy as well.

The newly appointed King's Own Herald, Amily, although still unsure of her own capability in that office, is doing fine work to support the efforts of Mags, her betrothed. She has even found a way to build an army of informants herself, a group of highly trained but impoverished young noblewomen groomed to serve the highborn ladies who live at Court, to be called "The Queens's Handmaidens."

And King Kyril has come up with the grand plan of turning Mags and Amily's wedding into a low-key diplomatic event that will simultaneously entertain everyone on the Hill and allow him to negotiate behind the scenes with all the attending ambassadors?something which had not been possible at his son Prince Sedric's wedding.

What could possibly go wrong?

The answer, of course, is "everything."

For all is not well in the neighboring Kingdom of Menmellith. The new king is a child, and a pretender to the throne has raised a rebel army. And this army is?purportedly?being supplied with arms by Valdemar. The Menmellith Regency Council threatens war. With the help of a ragtag band of their unlikely associates, Mags and Amily will have to determine the real culprit, amass the evidence to convince the Council, and prevent a war nobody wants?

?and, somewhere along the way, get married.

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Review

Praise for The Collegium Chronicles:

“Thanks to court intrigues and an attempt by foreign infiltrators to trick Valdemar to its disadvantage, Lackey makes a real page-turner out of Mags’ and the collegia’s development.” ?Booklist

“For fans of her work, the return to the land of Valdemar and the continued tale of treasured characters will not disappoint—and new readers are likely to become devoted fans. Lackey has a playful writing style that is easy to become engrossed in.” ?RT Book Reviews

“Returning to her beloved Valdemar universe, Lackey opens her new series at a pivotal time in the history of Valdemar.... Series fans will enjoy the variations on a familiar theme, while enough information is presented for first-timers to discover a world of high adventure and individual courage. Highly recommended.” ?Library Journal

“Lackey has effortlessly returned us to the wondrous realm of Valdemar.” ?Night Owl Reviews

“As always, she tells an entertaining and enjoyable tale of Valdemar with characters we love and a world we’ll always want to visit.” ?Pop Culture Beast

“Closer to the Heart has the two things that have always made me love these books: a richly detailed history of the world, and beautiful writing.” —The Arched Doorway

About the Author

Mercedes Lackey is a full-time writer and has published numerous novels and works of short fiction, including the best-selling Heralds of Valdemar series. She is also a professional lyricist and a licensed wild bird rehabilitator. She lives in Oklahoma with her husband, artist Larry Dixon, and their flock of parrots. She can be found at mercedeslackey.com or on Twitter at @mercedeslackey.

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Technically, this was spring, but it certainly didn’t feel like it. There was a definite bite to the air, and although there was no snow on the ground, the clouds looked as if they were contemplating dropping flakes any moment now. There was no scent of growing things in the air at all, only a vague dampness.

Herald Mags trudged along the street with his arms wrapped around his chest under his tattered cloak—tattered, because he was in disguise, coming to visit his little tribe of spies-in-training, in one of the poorer neighborhoods of Haven. The street was surprisingly smooth, but people did a lot of walking in this part of Haven, and this was also one of the older neighborhoods. There had been a couple hundred years’ worth of patient, ill-shod feet wearing down the cobbles.

It was not, by any means, a bad neighborhood. For the most part, folks here were working poor, with honest jobs; the neighborhood itself might have fallen on hard times over the decades, but it hadn’t turned into an absolute den of filth and thieves.

That was why the house full of orphans and cast-offs fit right in and caused no curiosity. The only real difference between “Aunty” Minda’s houseful of discarded children and every other congregation of cast-offs around here was that Aunty Minda had the financial backing of the Heralds, so that they were

guaranteed not to starve, go half-naked, or freeze.

Well, that, and the fact that they were right next to the “Weasel’s” pawn-shop, and at the first sight or sound of trouble, one to three very large and heavily armed men would come rushing over from the shop to beat the living daylight out of anyone stupid enough to try and cause the little household grief.

The few people on the street were in just as much of a hurry as he was to get where they were going and into the shelter of four walls. Like him, they strode briskly, heads down, worn and faded clothing bundled tightly around themselves. Unlike him, they’d be fortunate when they got to their destinations to find any sort of a fire going. In this part of town, people generally couldn’t afford a lot of fuel; they lit their fires only when they returned from work, and banked them as soon as they were ready to get under the covers in bed.

The street was relatively narrow, and the houses and shops were crowded closely together and on the dilapidated side. Most of them hadn’t been repainted in decades, and although they were in repair, you couldn’t exactly call it good repair; priority here was on keeping the building standing and the roof sound. After that, the landlords often left it up to the tenants to patch holes and repair shutters. The two- and three-story buildings crowded close together, sometimes leaning a little toward each other like whispering gossips. About half of them had a shop of some sort on the first floor, though many people, especially women, worked out of their homes—doing things like sewing, mending, and laundry. The wind that whipped down the street at him carried some of the scents of that business: cookshop aromas (redolent with the two staples of the poor, cabbage and onions), wet laundry, and beer. It was too late in the day for bread-baking, at least around here. The couple of bakers on this street baked their wares in the very early morning, so it would be ready to buy as people came out of their houses. The common breakfast around here was a hot roll, with a smear of fat, or jam, or for the most prosperous, butter or butter and jam. By this time of the day, the bakeshops were closed, except to serve people who had left their dinners to be cooked for a fee as the ovens slowly cooled. If your hearth was tiny, or you didn’t have a hearth, or you lived alone but couldn’t afford to eat out of a cookshop every day, that is what you did for dinner. You made up a pot of something and brought it to the baker as you left for work, and picked up your cooked dinner when you returned home. This was not the poorest part of Haven, poor though it was—those streets had the dubious distinction of being around the tanneries; where extremely cheap rents made up for the stinks associated with tanning leather. It was poor enough that quite often entire families crowded into a single room, or two and even three families shared a flat meant for one. The landlords didn’t care how many people you squeezed in, as long as the rent got paid regularly.

Almost no one here owned the flats where they lived, unless they were the shop-owners, living above their shops. Shops in this street tended to stay open for as long as the owner could manage, or find someone to man the counter for him, since people here worked long and irregular hours. It wasn’t uncommon to find a young child at the counter of many of these places, the offspring of the owner, learning the work of the business he or she would be inheriting by doing it.

It was only after dark—and in the summertime, well after dark—that these streets became dubious, even dangerous. Once the folks who worked for a living shut themselves behind their doors, the ones that lived in the shadows came out. After dark, when you heard shouts or noises, it didn’t pay to be curious, unless you recognized the voice as that of one of the neighbors.

He was glad to reach the converted shop where his little horde of helpers lived, and even gladder to get the door open and pull it tightly shut behind him as a wave of welcome warmth struck him.

He turned and took in the room. He’d had the building gutted when he bought it; since then, he and Minda had taken on so many littles that he’d had a sleeping loft built around all four walls and a staircase to reach it.

There were a couple of lamps up there, but nothing else but bedrolls and chests for clothing and trinkets. On the ground floor there were more bedrolls and chests, neatly stowed against the walls. There was only one real bed here, and that was the one reserved for “Aunty” Minda, who tended the children. There was a fireplace at the back of the room, nicely kitted out for cooking, and on either side of it, a row of buckets and basins for washing-up.

Two big kettles hung on hooks over the fire, both of them full of soup. Loaves of bread were waiting, stacked on a table beside the fire. Minda had the fires going briskly and the kettles pulled away from them so the soup didn’t burn, as well she should, given the weather. She was virtually alone here at this hour, since her charges were all either at lessons or at work. Most of them were at work; most of them were messengers and delivery runners, installed at various taverns and inns around the city.

Minda was seated on a stool at the side of the hearth, stirring one of the kettles of soup. She rose to greet him; he was pleased to note that regular meals, reliable heat in the winter, rest, and the (relatively) easy work of mothering a brood of youngsters had vastly improved her health. She walked easily now, only slightly favoring knees that had been swollen from years of scrubbing floors. She looked like every other respectable lady around here; maybe cleaner than most, since she was fanatical about cleanliness now that she had the means to enforce it. Her woolen gown and heavy linen undergown were much mended, patched and faded, but not in tatters. Her kindly face was older than her years, but that was the case with just about everyone down here. “All the littles are out, Master Harkon,” Minda told him—calling him by the name he used down here, Harkon, nephew of “Willy the Weasel,” who owned the pawn shop next door. She knew his real name of course, but no one here used it. Minda called all the youngsters “littles,” despite the fact that food and proper care had caused a few of them to sprout so fast they were as tall or taller than she was. And it was about three of those few he had come.

“I got it set up, Aunty,” he told her. “Berk, Ray, an’ yer li’l Sally’r set up t’ go inter service up on th’ Hill. I’ll come get ’em termorrow, an’ next week it’ll be Starlin’, Kip an’ Jo.”

Minda sighed, and looked both sad and relieved. “Well, th’ bigger lads ain’t gettin’ th’ work as runners so much,” she admitted, “now thet they’s tall as me. An’ we’re getting a wee mite crowded here. An’ Sally’ll be more’n a girl soon, an’ ain’t no place fer a girly wench here, ’mongst all these boys.”

Mags nodded. Having a girl who’d begun to bud woman-bits in a ramshackle “household” full of boys was just asking for trouble. Younglings would go experimenting when urges started, after all. And more likely to go experimenting among friends. “Sally’s t’be i’ Palace itself. Gonna put her in trainin’ as lady’s maid, all the airs and suchlike. She’ll be mighty handy t’me in a year or so, an’ put up in a room full’f other liddle gels in the meantime, so safe as houses. She’ll be gittin’ a day off ev’ fortnight t’run down here an’ see ye.”

Now Minda sighed with more than relief; she beamed to hear her “daughter” was going to be placed so well—though Mags never had learned if Sally was really Minda’s offspring, or someone the woman had just swept up the way a motherly cat will sweep up any kittens left orphaned. Minda would never have been able to dream of the girl going into service in the Palace before Mags had come along. The most she would have hoped for would have been that Sally could find a place in the kitchen of a tavern, or as a serving girl in an inn. And that would have been if she’d been lucky.

“Th’ lads ’re all gonna be placed as hall-boys ’round the highborn houses. I’ll be keepin’ good track of ’em, an’ I’ll get ’em out if they’re treated bad. They’ll be damn useful, you bet. Hall-boys hear ’bout ever’thin’.” Mags was particularly pleased about that. The job of the hall-boy was quite literally to stay in a little cubicle shrouded by a curtain just off the front hall and answer the door so that visitors were never kept waiting more than a few moments. For the extremely wealthy families where he was getting his boys placed, it was a

matter of pride to have a hall-boy that did nothing but that, day or night. He answered the door, got names and rank, and ran to get the steward so the visitors could be properly attended to. The hall-boy would know the names, rank, and business of every single person that came visiting, and would certainly be able to pick up pretty much everything in the way of gossip that he cared to.

“Well, nobody could’a ast better nor that,” Minda agreed, bobbing her head. “And t’ain’t gonna be no harder work than runnin’ messages all day.” She took his elbow and drew him over to a second stool on the hearth. “Now. Let’s hev us a bit uv gossip.”

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Minda didn’t have a lot of information for him, but Mags hadn’t expected too much. Spring was the quiet season, at least until the Spring Fair. The highborn who only came to Court in the Winter were already on their way back to their estates, taking advantage of snow-free roads that were not yet axle-deep in mud due to spring rains. Merchants were busy planning their sales or purchases for the moment the weather turned warm. Farmers were hardest at work; it was already well into lambing season, and soon enough cattle and horses would start dropping babies. Anything that hadn’t gotten mended over the winter would have to be put in shape to use once the ground softened enough to plow. Common folk were too busy at this season to get up to much mischief, and it was unlikely that his ears all over the city were going to hear anything. So what he got was a rough litany of minor affairs—what prosperous fellow was sending presents and messages to a lady who was not his wife, what major robberies had taken place and who the likely perpetrator was, who had been seen in places he ought not to be.

He waited until the younglings began trickling in, and gave his chosen half-dozen the good news as they stood in line to wash hands and faces. And they took it as such.

“Oh!” Sally cried, her cheeks turning pink with pleasure. “I am going to be trained for a lady’s maid, then! I am so glad!”

Mags grinned; Sally was not only a bright little thing, she’d been making concerted efforts at “bettering” her speech and her manners, drilling herself as well as studying with the Sisters of Nanya, ever since he’d suggested he might be able to get her such a placing.

As for the boys, if their speech was a bit rougher than hers, that wouldn’t matter at first; all that was asked of a hall-boy was that he be quick to answer the door, self-effacing, and able to pronounce names and say “yes, milord” or “no, milord,” properly. They’d learn.

And all five of them had had occasion to see hall-boys at work, when Mags had sent them to various wealthy houses ostensibly delivering flowers or sweets at Midwinter. It was hard and often long work, since a hall-boy rarely had time off except to eat—but it certainly was easier than spending all day running messages or parcels all over town.

He gave the first three their letters of introduction and the directions to the Palace Gate and the Great Houses where they would present themselves, and drilled them in exactly what they were to say when they turned up at the servant’s entrance as near to sunrise as they could manage. When he was satisfied they would make a creditable impression, he patted each of them on the shoulder. “Now, Sally, you’re gonna be i’ the Palace. I’ll be findin’ a way t’ talk to you about once a week, but if you hear somethin’ that’s important, you find a way t’ get to the kitchen of Herald’s Collegium and talk t’ the cook. ’E’ll get me.” As she nodded, he turned to the two boys. “You’ll have a harder time gettin’ away, so if you hear anythin’ I should know, take this—” he handed each of them a ball of red string “—an’ tie a piece t’ a tree near the servants’ door. I’ll figger a reason t’ come callin’ as Herald Mags, and ye kin tell me what you’ve got then.”

“You ’spect us to hear anything, Master Harkon?” Berk asked curiously.

“Honestly? Not really, no,” Mags told them. “At least not ’til yer well settled inter your jobs, and they’ll give you leave t’ take an hour or two for yourselves now an’ again, an’ a regular day off. But I druther have a plan in place where you kin let me know we need t’ talk, than have you learn somethin’ then ruin all thet hard work I went to in order t’ git you in place by having t’ run off straight to me.” He clapped both boys on the shoulders. “So concentrate on settlin’ in, keepin’ yer minds on yer jobs an’ not on pretty chambermaids and handsome footmen, an’ not getting sacked!”

All three of the youngsters grinned at him, but promised that they would do just that. For his part, Mags felt perfect confidence in them; they’d already shown they were sharp and clever. They were ready for this . . . and Minda was right. The little refuge was beginning to get a bit crowded. It was time for the first of the lot to move on.

And he already had some ideas in mind for the next batch, after these six were safely in place.

He took his leave of all of them, since it was about time for Minda to gather them for supper, and he didn’t want to cut into their last hours with their friends. Wrapping his cloak tightly about himself, he left the converted shop and headed back to the inn where he had left Dallen. With the wind at his back, he wasn’t quite so cold, and it gave him an excuse to walk briskly rather than sauntering as Harkon would have done in better weather.

Anyone with any sense was inside. This was no weather to linger on the street. Even if you didn’t have much fuel and your walls whistled like a flock of birds with leaks, you were still better being inside than out. :Think they’ll do all right?: he asked his Companion, as he let the wind push him back up the way he had come.

:Barring accident, they’ll do splendidly,: Dallen replied. :And all three of them are quick; even if there is some sort of mishap, they’re clever enough to think their way out of it again.:

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Council meetings, Amily had decided, must have been specifically designed to occupy as much time as possible for people who had a great deal of free time to spend. The participants seemed to delight in arguing over minutiae. Maybe things would change once better weather started, but right now the members of the King’s Greater Council seemed disinclined to leave their comfortable chairs and the warm Council chamber.

On the other hand, the fact that they could spend entire candlemarks arguing over tiny things like whether the wool from chirras should be taxed at the same rate as wool from sheep or from lambs meant that things were . . . safe. Or relatively so. So. Small blessings. There was no war, not even rumors of war. Banditry was at a level where the local Guard garrisons could handle it.

After the near-riots at Midwinter, caused by the feud between the noble Houses of Raeylen and Chendlar, even perpetually disputing highborn families were keeping their quarrels confined to vicious gossip and cutting remarks. Street-brawls and threats of exile by the King had made their due impression on other feuding families, but what had really sent shock rippling through the Court was that the son of Lord Kaltar of House Raeylen had very nearly carried out a plot to murder all but one of the members of both Houses, marry the Chendlar girl, and inherit the lot. With all that to occupy them, most people were still chewing over the gossip-fodder.

And there were no more mysterious assassins sent by Karse scattered about the city. Large blessings.

“Perhaps,” she said gently, although she got their immediate attention when she spoke, “We should be looking at how rare this wool is, compared with mature sheep’s wool or lambswool, and tax it accordingly.”

She looked around at the circular table—circular, so that every member of the Greater Council could easily look into the faces of every other member, and no one could claim he or she had anything but an equal seat. All the faces that met hers wore relatively contented expressions, cementing her notion that the Councilors were mostly “arguing” for the sake of argument, and being in not-unpleasant company while being served the King’s best wine and manchet breads flavored with rose water. Not a bad way to spend a bitter afternoon.

“But what if the market becomes depressed by an excessive tax?” someone demanded, and they were off and running again, but this time at least the argument was getting somewhere instead of being an endless circle.

She was more than a bit gratified—who wouldn’t be—that now she was taken seriously in the Council meetings. Or seriously enough that when she spoke up, what she said was given due consideration. She’d been afraid that it would take years before she got even a fraction of the respect the Council had given her father.

Maybe the office of King’s Own Herald by itself brought along a basic level of respect.

:Or perhaps,: Rolan said gently into her mind, :They’ve been paying attention on the rare occasions when you speak up, and have learned that when you do say something, it’s worth listening to.:

:Or both,: she replied, successfully keeping herself from blushing. She wondered if her father had gotten this sort of encouragement from Rolan when he first became King’s Own.

It had been a long day, and she was just as glad that there was not an official Court dinner tonight. Kyril had made it quite plain that he intended to dine in his quarters with his family, which meant that only about half the members of the Court who were in residence would take dinner in the Great Hall. Those would be the members of the Court who had no residences of their own. The rest would return to their own fine townhouses here on the Hill for dinner, and possibly to entertain or be entertained. There could be music, informal dancing, and gaming. That meant she was free to have dinner with Mags, and they would probably do so with the instructors at the Collegium. The King only had Court dinners about once a week, although the Crown Prince and Princess, Sedic and Lydia, presided at Court dinners roughly three times as often. Lydia had told Amily that they did so in order to take the burden off Kyril, who frankly loathed the long dinners even more than he disliked tedious Council sessions. She couldn’t blame him. The Great Hall was huge, people had to talk so loudly in order to be heard that everything was a babble, and even with the best will in the world, not every dish arrived at the tables better than lukewarm. It had occurred to her, more than once lately, that Kyril was looking . . . older. Not old, but older. The office was wearing on him.

While Father is actually looking younger. No longer having to juggle the dual duties of King’s Spy and King’s Own, now that he had completely recovered from what could only be described as “returning from the dead,” Amily’s father Herald Nikolas seemed to her to be reveling in the chance to get away from the Court and do things.

I certainly can’t blame him.

On the other hand, these Council sessions were a unique opportunity for her to learn a great deal about the individual members of the Council. As long as she remained quiet, they tended to treat her as part of the furniture. It wasn’t that they ignored her, it was more that they were used to her father, who had a very powerful Gift of Mindspeech, and could tender his advice to Kyril silently. They probably assumed she was doing the same, and it suited both her and the King to allow them to continue with that impression. Thus far

she hadn't uttered so much as a single word during Council sessions that would make any of the members think she was challenging them, or even observing them with any attitude other than respect for their age and experience.

Which, of course, she was . . . but she was also weighing everything they said against what she knew were their own personal agendas and interests. Cynical perhaps, but Amily was a realist, and she had been observing these selfsame personages for years at the behest of her father, back when she was nothing more than quiet, unremarkable Amily, Herald Nikolas's crippled daughter, of no consequence whatsoever. Yes, they were all experienced. But they were also seasoned politicians and courtiers, and all of them had left defeated rivals in their wake. Now, they wouldn't be on the Council if the King and the Heralds didn't think they would keep the welfare of the Kingdom foremost in their minds. But there was no doubt that the continued accumulation of wealth and power lurked in the background whenever they came to a decision. As long as there was no conflict between these two motivations, Amily held her tongue. But she was always on the watch for a moment when the latter edged out the former.

Today had been one of those days. They all had commercial interests, whether it be mercantile or agricultural, or a combination of both, and edging the taxes one way or another could shift the balance of wealth and power around this table and around the Kingdom. It had been like watching people playing a card game for very high stakes.

The Crown Prince and Princess had sat in on this meeting as well, although they had not contributed anything to the discussion. She could tell from their expressions, however, that neither of them missed a thing—and it was very likely that tonight, at dinner in the Royal Suite, this entire meeting would be hashed out again between the soup and the dessert.

She was just as glad not to be a part of that. Going through it once was enough. Prince Sedric seemed to take a great deal of pleasure in this game of politics, though, and for that she was grateful. When—as she fully expected—the King stepped aside to allow his son to become the reigning Monarch, she was not going to have to educate him in a thing.

Nor Lydia, either. Like Amily, Lydia had been playing the quiet, unassuming observer at the behest of her elders—in this case, her Uncle—for many years. If Sedric knew the highborn players in this game intimately, then it was Lydia who knew the merchant “princes.” Together they were going to make a formidable team.

And thank the gods for the greater favors. That barring a tragedy, we're going to get a pair like Lydia and Sedric as our monarchs when the time comes, and not a child.

That was the current situation in Menmellith, a Kingdom near Valdemar's southern border. The situation had been so precarious, in fact, that Menmellith had not sent an ambassador to Sedric and Lydia's wedding.

This, among other reasons, was why Kyril was pressing Amily and Mags to have their wedding soon. He wanted to make a state occasion of it, so that those foreign lands who had not sent a representative to the Crown Prince's wedding would have a second chance with a lot less international political pressure attached to the ceremony.

Politics. We can't even escape them when it comes to our personal lives. She sighed internally. Evidently, once one is King's Own, one doesn't actually have a personal life. No wonder father seems younger. I think I'm taking on all the years he shed.

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Mags and Amily both ended up at the Collegium dining hall late—so late that they missed all their friends and the instructors, and there weren't more than a handful of Trainees still there. He glanced over at her, thinking how serene and simply pretty she looked in her Formal Whites, and how deceptively unthreatening. She could have been any highborn girl; brown hair neatly braided and pinned around her head, big, soft brown eyes, delicate face—

—and he had seen her kill men, taking carefully placed, precise arrow shots. Not that he hadn't killed his share, and more, but he didn't look harmless, the way she did. He wondered if any of the Councilors ever thought of that, when they faced her across the table.

“Well, at least there ain't a crowd,” he said, watching the few Trainees desperately trying to combine eating and studying, and the Trainees on kitchen duty bustling about cleaning up. “We can always beg at the kitchen hatch for some crumbs.”

But they hadn't even picked a spot to sit before the Cook sent someone out with loaded trays for both of them.

Mags grinned and thanked the Trainee who handed them their dinners. “Bless you and Cook, and tell him I said so,” Amily added, and they took their food and found an out-of-the-way spot to enjoy their dinner in peace. One near the fireplace, and away from the windows. The ruddy light of sunset was not improving the bleak lawns and gardens outside.

“This weren't—wasn't—ever Collegium dinner,” Mags remarked, looking at the succulent roast pork, baked apples, and fancy-cut mixed vegetables. Not to mention the little pastries shaped like swans and filled with whipped cream with dollops of jam on top. The food looked and smelled heavenly.

“No, tonight was supposed to be stew,” Amily told him. “This is what went on the plates over at the Great Hall.” Then she considered the plates. “Part of what went on plates at the Great Hall,” she amended, and shook her head. “I should be used to it by now, but I still find it difficult to contemplate dinners that consist of a dozen courses or more. Our people make sure that nothing goes to waste, but the sort of excess that the highborn expect to see as a meal still bothers me.”

“I spent most've my life half-starved,” Mags reminded her. “I try not t'think on it too much or it'll make me mad. What goes back t'the kitchen after one Court meal'd feed all the mine-kids fer a month.” He shook his head, and dug in. “I expect the Cook sent over for a couple of plates and kept them warm for us.”

“Sometimes I suspect Cook of having a Foresight Gift.” The two of them ate silently for a bit; it had been a long day for both of them, Mags suspected, although his had at least been spent in doing constructive things rather than sitting around a table and listening to Councilors argue.

Speaking of which. . . .

“I had me an idea,” he said, contemplating his pastry swan. It really did look too pretty to eat.

“Oh?” Amily clearly had no such reservations about her swan. She lifted it carefully to her lips and bit the head off. She looks so sweet, like a little brown coney, all big eyes and soft hair. And then she bites the heads off things . . .

Which, of course, made them perfect for each other. Just like his cousin Bey and his little assassin-trained wife.

:Dallen . . . sometimes I think I might be more like Bey than I'd like to think.:

:And this is bad, how?: Dallen replied archly.

:Point.:

“Well . . . you know how they're tryin' t'make a big thing over the weddin'. An' you know how our lives go. An' the chance fer a whole lotta things t'go wrong on the way is pretty high . . .” He raised an eyebrow at her; she sighed and nodded, and nibbled pastry.

“So, it occurs t'me . . . why not just run off some afternoon, an get married? You, me an' yer pa so's he don't feel left out. We just won't tell anyone else. That way, if ev'thing does go sideways, we'll be married already anyway.” He looked at her expectantly. “Whatcha think?”

She stared at him for a moment. “I think it's very clever!” she replied, much to his relief. “And I am all in favor of this plan!” She finished her swan thoughtfully. “The best thing is if we just wait until we both have several candlemarks free at the same time, rather than planning, because you know if we try to plan this, something will go wrong.”

“That's a fact,” Mags agreed. “I'm mighty glad you think this's a good idea.”

She smiled, which quite transformed her face from “quiet” to “lovely.” “I don't think it's a good idea. I think it is a great idea. Maybe I will stop having nightmares about things going wrong.” Then she made a little face. “Mind you, thinking of second-chance plans is much more entertaining than most Council meetings.”

He laughed. “Well, don't let them know that. Oh, I got my young'uns coming up in the mornin'.”

She gave him a little sideways smile. “So, you insinuate your little spies in amongst the unwary then?”

“Better'n tryin' to be twenty places at once, like your Pa did,” he observed. “Now, I know why he done things that way, but the way I figure it, when I start out with the young'uns, I know they're gonna be loyal to me once they've growed up. So I don' need to go huntin' about for servants I can trust.”

She nodded. “And he never could devote more than half of his time to either job.”

“Too right.”

The Trainee who'd served them took away their empty plates while they sat together and discussed the business of the day—or at least as much of it as either of them was willing to talk about in such a public place. Finally it dawned on both of them that they could do this much more comfortably and privately back in the quarters Amily occupied that had once been Bear's.

The walk to Healers' Collegium was more than a bit chilly, and the warmth of the hothouse that Amily was responsible for came as a relief. And it just seemed silly not to take the conversation to the most comfortable spot in the suite of rooms and then one thing led to another, and there wasn't much talking getting done for a goodly while.

“So . . . anythin' I really need t'know 'bout?” Mags asked into the soft dark.

Amily settled her head on his shoulder, and he pulled the blankets up closer around both of them. There was a very little light from the glowing coals of their fire, their featherbed felt very good after a day of walking all over Haven, having Amily cuddled in his arms was all he could have wished for and he would have been

quite happy to never move again. Which, of course, was impossible, but it was a very nice thought.

“Kyril wants the wedding to be just after the Spring Fair.” She sighed. He understood. She hadn’t wanted their wedding to be turned into a spectacle in the first place, and having it right after the Spring Fair made him suspect the King planned to make use of some of the entertainers that would arrive for it. Then he sensed her smile. “But it won’t be our wedding, will it? Just a kind of pageant where we are the chief actors. Meaningless, really.”

He chuckled. “Ayup. An’ we’ll get all dressed up an’ say our lines, an’ if th’ thing falls apart ’cause my cousin decides t’pay a visit, it won’t matter a bit.”

She laughed. “That’s the spirit!” Then she stiffened. “You don’t think Bey is—”

“No. Besides I ain’t invitin’ him.” He mulled the situation over. “So, walk me through th’ reasons.”

“Kyril wants to make this another reason for gathering in important people in the Kingdom and ambassadors. Of course, Sedric’s wedding was an occasion for that, but they were all rather preoccupied with it, and not with politics and negotiation and maneuvering. Plus, I wasn’t King’s Own then. That’s the next reason, Kyril wants outsiders to think of me as innocuous. With attention fixed on me as a bride, people are more likely to dismiss me as not as sharp as my father. They’ll underestimate me. The only people who need to understand just how sharp I am are the ones on the Council, but for anyone else, it could be very advantageous for me to be overlooked.”

The fire popped a little, as Mags mulled all that over. He nodded thoughtfully. “That’s all good reasons. Gotta agree with ’em. Even if I don’ much like bein’ trotted out an’ put on show.”

“Kyril had reasons for that, too. This is a good time for you to continue to create the impression you’re good-hearted, solid, dependable, and a bit thick,” she pointed out, and he had to laugh, because that was exactly what Nikolas had told him to do, back when he began learning the same craft that had made Nikolas the King’s Spy.

“So I’m a bit thick, an’ you’re just a pretty thing at the King’s side. Well, don’ we make a likely pair!” He laughed harder as she gave a most unladylike snort.

“The more I think about running off and making the vows before a priest, the better I like the idea,” she said after a while, just as he was drifting off to sleep. “The sooner, the better.”

“Aight,” he agreed, and drifted away.

In the morning, Amily was already gone when Mags finally crawled up out of sleep. His dreams had been full of wedding nonsense—not nightmares, and not of things going wrong, but of nonsensical stuff. Like the King insisting that he and Amily get married on a platform built in a tree, or of Amily’s dress somehow being made entirely of bees. He couldn’t quite make out what had triggered that image.

Or Bey and roughly a hundred assassins turning up at the last minute to outline them in thrown knives as they kissed.

As he dressed, then made his way to the Collegium and ate, it occurred to him that he was not entirely happy with the King’s plan. The Spring Fair was not all that far away, and if the King intended to make some sort of enormous political and diplomatic event out of it, there wasn’t a great deal of time to get everything

ready. . . .

He spooned up oatmeal loaded with chopped nuts and drizzled with honey, and considered all his options. Now, granted, Spring wasn't a bad choice for this thing. After all, no one ever went to war in the Spring, or almost never. Spring warfare meant pulling your people away from their fields and flocks at the worst possible time. It meant that the area where you were fighting would be utterly ruined; fields trampled before seeds even had a chance to sprout, calving, foaling and lambing disrupted—and you'd have the devil's own time trying to move herds with pregnant females and young animals out of harm's way quickly. You went to war in the Spring and you insured that part of the country would starve, so unless that was actually your goal . . . it was a monumentally stupid idea, one that gained you nothing. If you lost, the local populace would descend on your country in an orgy of desperate looting in order to make up for their lands being ruined. If you won, you'd have to support a starving population.

And that didn't even touch on trying to march and move and fight in mud, because the combination of Spring rains and newly plowed fields meant you would be up to your knees in mud. And so would your supply trains.

But Prince Sedric's wedding had taken nearly a year to prepare, and even if this wasn't going to be as elaborate, how would they ever have the time to get it all ready?

:You won't,: Dallen admonished him. :The King wants this; the King will do the arranging, or rather, delegate people to make the arrangements for him. Remember what you and Amily agreed on last night; neither of you are under any obligation to concoct a "perfect wedding" for each other. It's a show; just do your parts and let other people worry about doing theirs.:

:And if it all falls apart?: Mags could not help asking, although with a wry cast to his thoughts.

:Then as players ever and always do, we all blame the director. Who will probably be Lady Dia.:

Mags thought of that, as he got a plate of bacon and eggs and bolted it down. :I'd rather not. Lady Dia can be very . . . fierce.:

He had an appointment to meet Nikolas down at the shop, in their guises of Harkon and Willy the Weasel. The Weasel rarely put his head in at the shop anymore; it was understood that he was leaving the bulk of the work to his nephew and his nephew's hired toughs, but it would have been altogether out of character for him to stay away entirely. Although the shop did the bulk of its business after dark, it was the Weasel's way to open it for a few hours in the morning, so that men who'd pawned their tools and had the money to redeem them could do so before hurrying off to a job.

This meant subterfuge, of course. Mags went down into Haven as a Herald, and left Dallen at the stables at a Guard post. Then he left the post by means of a tunnel under the street, and emerged in a back room at a tavern, where he became Harkon. Harkon staggered out, giving a convincing imitation of a man who had been drinking all night and needed to sober himself up before facing his uncle—stopping at a cookshop for a mug of tea so strong the spoon should have melted, at another for a second, not quite as strong, and at an apothecary for a dose of his "Sovereign Remedy." By the time he got to the pawn shop, he was apparently sober enough to evade the Weasel's wrath.

The shop was already open, and as Mags entered, a fellow in a carpenter's apron was just finishing redeeming his tools. The man hurried out with a nod to the "nephew," as Nikolas—aka "Willy the Weasel"—grunted and unlocked the door into the protected part of the shop.

Even if you had known that “Willy the Weasel” was the same person as Herald Nikolas, it would have taken a trained eye to see the Herald in the pawnshop owner. The Weasel’s greasy, graying hair straggled down his back in a most untidy manner, he had an unattractive squint, and his mouth was always primmed up tightly, as if he was afraid to give away so much as a word. If anything, the Weasel was very memorable, as opposed to Herald Nikolas, who was so very ordinary that if it had not been for his Heraldic Whites, he would have faded into the background of any crowd.

The shop was really two rooms; the front part held the bulkier, heavier, or more inexpensive items on shelves all around it; the back part, behind a wall so sturdy it could have been a jail cell, had a locked door and a barred window, through which the pawnbrokers conducted their business. That part of the shop held all the valuable stuff, and, of course, the cashbox.

“See, Stef turned up like ’e promised, nuncle,” Mags said, locking the door behind him and taking Nikolas’s place on the stool so that the “Weasel” could drop into a far more comfortable chair that stood behind it. :Have you been told about the circus we’re to put on?:

“Le’s ’ope ’is work’s more reliable this time,” Nikolas growled. “’E’s got ’alf ’is ’ousehold on our shelves. I’d be best pleased t’clear ’is trash out.” :I had breakfast with Kyril, so yes.: Nikolas shook his head imperceptibly. :I can’t make up my mind if it’s the idea of a genius or a disaster in the making.:

“Could use th’ space,” Mags agreed, carefully counting out the money in the drawer under the counter. This was routine. Every time someone new took over the window, he was supposed to count the money. :Amily and I decided last night that we aren’t taking any chances. We’re going to pop off quietly to a priest when we both have a free morning or an afternoon and just do the thing. We know half a dozen holy folk who’d tie the knot for us without a second thought, and neither of us care much who is the deity in charge. That way, when the disaster looms, at least we’ll already be shackled and it won’t matter to us if the thing falls apart, or gets stormed out of existence, or gets raided by bandits . . . or any of a thousand other things goes wrong.:

Nikolas blinked at him blankly for a moment, then covered it by half-lidding his eyes and tucking his chin down as if he was about to take a nap. :I take back everything I ever said about you being an idiot,: he replied, with a mental chuckle. :Am I invited?:

:How could I dare say no? I’m not anxious to be knifed in the dark by my father-in-law.:

A very faint chuckle emerged from the “drowsing” Nikolas. It sounded enough like a hint of a snore to pass for one. :Definitely not an idiot. I approve. And I take it we keep this a little secret amongst the six of us?: Nikolas had included the three Companions, of course. It wouldn’t exactly be possible to keep something like this a secret from them.

:It wouldn’t do to disappoint Lady Dia and Princess Lydia,: Mags agreed. :Better to let them bask in the illusion that they’re creating a perfect wedding for us. They’ll probably wallow in it, actually.:

Nikolas chuckled again. :Considering that Amily’s mother and I essentially did the same thing as you plan to—running off to a priest to avoid the hash that our two mothers were making, arguing over every detail, you are upholding a fine tradition.:

:Good to know. And speaking of “knowing,” what is it I need to hear?:

Mags spent the rest of his candelmarks, right up until midmorning (when the Weasel declared that keeping the shop open until “the lads” turned up to take it over after dark was a waste of time), trading information with his mentor. None of it was terribly important, but any part of it could become important. One thing

Mags had learned above all else; when it came to being the King's Spy, the most unexpected things could turn out to be relevant.

As he and Nikolas locked up the shop, he saw Nikolas's head cock in that odd way that let him know that Evory was speaking to him. And at nearly that same moment, Dallen chuckled.

:Be careful what you ask for,: Dallen said. :You might get it. The King cut short the Lesser Court in order to see to some detail of the Treasury. Amily is free. You are free. Nikolas is free. And Brother Elban just down the street is tending his garden and is essentially free and of all the people you know who would do this thing, Brother Elban is your favorite. So. Would you like to get married?:

• • •

It was with a feeling of profound relief that Mags kissed his bride under the combined (beaming) gazes of his new father-in-law, Brother Elban, Healer and tender of the little Shrine of Alia of the Birds, and three Companions.

He actually could not have planned this better. Everything had conspired to be perfect.

Elban was a lone cleric at his little Shrine; he didn't need much, just a room to live in and his garden. Alia of the Birds was a very minor Goddess, as such things went, with a tiny congregation and no real rituals of Her own. Her clerics were solitary, but not hermits; they dedicated their lives to healing and teaching the poorest of the poor. Several of Mags' youngsters took lessons with him. The Shrine occupied the same footprint as any of the houses or shops in this area; it consisted of a walled garden mostly planted with healing herbs, with Elban's little living quarters at the back. The walls of the garden and the dwelling were pleasantly weathered stone, a soft, pinkish granite. The statue of Alia, a motherly looking lady of middle age, with a round, smiling face and carved and real birds perched all over her, was made of a similar stone.

Within the shelter of the Shrine's walls, true spring had come early to Brother Elban's garden, lilies bloomed at the foot of Alia's statue, and the birds perched in the vines on the wall provided all the music they needed. He and Nikolas had detoured just enough to resume their identities as Heralds before meeting Amily here.

And the deed was done. They'd managed to get married without anything going wrong or interfering. Mags had never heard the wedding ceremony as performed by Alia's clergy before, but it had been lovely.

Now you will feel no rain, for each of you will be shelter for the other.

Now you will feel no cold, for each of you will be warmth to the other.

Now there will be no loneliness, for each of you will be companion to the other.

Now you are two persons, but there is only one life before you.

Treat yourselves and each other with respect, and remind yourselves often of what brought you together. Give the highest priority to the tenderness, gentleness and kindness that your connection deserves. When frustration, difficulties and fear assail your relationship, as they threaten all relationships at one time or another, remember to focus on what is right between you, not only the part which seems wrong. In this way, you can ride out the storms when clouds hide the face of the sun in your lives—remembering that even if you lose sight of it for a moment, the sun is still there. And if each of you takes responsibility for the quality of your life together, it will be marked by abundance and delight.

“Now, remember,” Nikolas reminded the beaming cleric. “Unless it is vital, no one is to know they are

already wed.”

“Oh no, it would disappoint all those people who are likely planning a spectacle,” the thin little fellow replied, bobbing his head with understanding. He had no special robes; Alia’s clergy wore nothing more ostentatious than a long, brown tunic and treads, with a leather bird sewn over the heart. “No, we cannot possibly have that. It is not every day that the King’s Own gets married. People have expectations and we shouldn’t deny them their holiday, now, should we?” Then he beamed at them. “It will be our little secret.”

He let them out the garden gate, and Amily immediately swung herself up onto Rolan’s back. “I—”

“—have t’ get up the Hill, I know,” Mags finished for her. “Go. I’ll see ye at dinner if not afore. I got law-court this afternoon.”

“Don’t starve yourself,” was all she said, and then she and Rolan were trotting up the street and rounded the corner.

Mags looked to his mentor. Nikolas nodded in the general direction of a cookshop they both favored, and Mags grinned in agreement. He felt positively euphoric, actually, now that everything was settled. A weight had very much fallen from his shoulders, and it looked as if Nikolas felt exactly the same.

The explanation for that came only when they had finished their meal and were about to part company, with Mags going on to the law-court, and Nikolas to whatever mysterious errand would occupy him this afternoon. “Now if something takes me out of Haven, it won’t matter,” Nikolas sighed.

Mags nodded. “That be true,” he replied. “If somethin’ had called ye away afore the circus, Amily’d’ve been . . .” He groped for words.

“Very sad. Absolutely understanding, but very sad.” Nikolas’s normally inexpressive face took on a melancholy cast for a moment. “I have had to miss too many of the important moments of her life. I am glad I did not have to miss this one.”

• • •

Nikolas did not say where he was going, and Mags didn’t ask. This was not because they were ignoring the one cardinal rule of their occupation, which was always make sure someone knows where you will be. It was because Dallen had already spoken to Evory, and Dallen knew where Nikolas was headed. So that made two other creatures that knew exactly where Nikolas was going and what he intended to do, and that was enough.

Mags had quite enough on his plate with attending the Law Court; he didn’t need to start fretting about whatever possibly dangerous place Nikolas was going to go.

Any Herald who was not already teaching at the Collegium—and truly, what was Mags actually qualified to teach?—was assigned to the Law Courts in various parts of the city. Prince Sedric was assigned to the Court Royal, which tried all cases that the lesser Courts passed to the higher, or those cases that were appealed. Not that many cases were appealed, because before one could appeal a case, all parties involved had to agree to re-testifying under Truth Spell in the Lesser Court. And was where Mags and the others came in, because in order to set the Truth Spell, you needed a Herald.

Mostly the Heralds of the Law Courts merely had to be present; a constant reminder that if the parties on either side or the judge demanded it, the Herald in attendance could set Truth Spell on any witness. Not the coercive version—although Mags could do that. Generally the coercive version of the Truth Spell was not

needed in these simple trials.

This particular Court was in the same district as Willy the Weasel's pawn shop; the Guard and the City Watch here all knew Mags both in his guise of Harkon and as Herald Mags. That was useful, since they could arrange for trials where Harkon might be called in to identify someone who had pawned something to take place when Herald Mags was off-duty and some other Herald was taking his place.

Like most of the district, the courtroom and the building it was in had seen better days. Meticulously repaired and scrupulously cleaned, nevertheless, everything was old, worn, and a bit shabby. There were six benches for onlookers and witnesses, a table and bench each for the accuser and the accused, and at the front facing the rest, the judge's bench and the witness box. Then there was Mags' seat, at the back of the courtroom, off with the bailiff and a couple of Guards and a couple of members of the Watch who made sure things didn't get out of hand. The walls were whitewashed plaster . . . just a bit dingy. The furnishings were all dark wood that had long ago lost any semblance of polish.

Mostly, to tell the truth, Mags was just there for show, to remind the witnesses that they could lie under oath, but if they were challenged, they'd be caught at it, and might be in as much trouble, if not more, than the accused.

The courtroom was empty when he entered it, except for the bailiff, who greeted him like the old friend that he was by now, and offered him a mug of hot cider. Mags accepted it gratefully. The courtroom was cold and damp, and he kept his cloak on, as did the bailiff. There were fireplaces in the building, but none in this room.

"Seems like Spring ain't never gonna come," Bailiff Creed said, blowing on his cider before taking a sip.

"Seems like it's comin' too soon, iff'n ye ast me," Mags replied. "King wants me an' Amily leg-shackled after Spring Fair." He said this with a sigh, though inwardly he was chuckling. There was no time like the present to get the rumor-mill going. The less the general public knew about how things really stood between him and Amily, the better.

"Criminy! No more tom-cattin' 'bout fer you, me lad!" said the bailiff (who was, of course, married; the King encouraged marriage among the Watch and those of the Guard who were posted within the city as he felt it encouraged stability). Creed laughed, not unkindly. "Not that I ever heerd all that much 'bout you kickin' up yer heels."

Because I am very careful that my visits to my eyes and ears at the brothels are done by Harkon or some other rake-hell. "Nah, an' truth is, it ain't the bein' married, it's the mort've fuss an' feather of gettin' married I ain't lookin' forrard to," Mags replied mournfully. "On'y good thing 'bout it is, I'm orphan, an' Amily's on'y got her Pa, so at least we ain't got two Mamas fightin' over weddin' thins."

"But she'll have a mort've friends makin' hay over this, you mark my words," Creed replied. "You're in for it, m'lad. Just smile an' nod an' say ever'thin' looks bootiful. An' if it's costly, make sure th' King's a-payin' for it." And at that moment, the Court began to fill up, which meant they both had to be on best behavior.

The first several cases were either quite clear-cut (the Watch having caught someone in the act of theft or mayhem)—or boring (quarrels between neighbors that had gotten to the point of being brought before the Court).

Then something came up that made both Mags and Creed sit up and start paying attention.

The first hint that matters were out of the ordinary was that a parade of five people trudged into the courtroom and took seats on the witness bench.

Then an enormous man was brought into the dock in irons that looked like dainty bracelets on his massive wrists. He was incredibly muscular, with muscles like a stonecutter or a blacksmith, taller than both the Watch that were with him, coarse features and a bald pate. And yet, the man's expression and body language were that of a terrified child.

The man's accuser came into the Court, and Mags took an instant dislike to him. Mags could read both his body language and his surface thoughts, and what he read proclaimed this "Cobber Pellen" to be a bully and a liar. He looked as if he was someone who was accustomed to take what he wanted from those who were weaker than he was. Once he had been muscular, but now he was going to fat, with a round head and features that could have been considered handsome, except for the petulance of the mouth and the ugly glitter of his eyes. Both accuser and accused were positioned in front of the judge, and the accuser was the first to speak, according to the rules.

"This animal attacked me without no reason yer Honor!" Pellen proclaimed. "It shoulda never been 'llowed on the streets! It shoulda been locked up years ago! It's dangerous! It nearly broke my arm!"

All the while Pellen was proclaiming how "dangerous" the huge fellow was, all the man did was cower—which was a strange thing to see from someone who looked as if he earned his living by throwing rowdies out of taverns. But all that Mags could sense was fear . . . fear, and confusion.

"And have you any witnesses?" the judge began, when he was interrupted by a shout from a ragged young woman who pushed her way into the court. Mags didn't get more than an impression of a wild mop of curly brown hair, a whirlwind of ragged skirts and shawls, and clenched fists, before she was already at the front of the courtroom.

"Cobber Pellen's a damn liar!" the woman shouted, and launched herself at him as if she was going to tear him to pieces with her bare hands. And the court erupted into chaos, with the Watch intervening between them, Cobber Pellen shouting one thing, the young woman shouting another, the five on the witness bench making a hasty exit from the room, and the bailiff trying to subdue Cobber as one of the Watch tried to subdue the woman.

Mags considered wading in himself, but decided instead to keep an eye on the accused.

Who was huddling in the corner, looking as if he was going to cry at any moment. There was something very odd going on here. The surface thoughts of the poor fellow were in chaos, and it was as if every single thought had to fight its way through treacle to come to the surface. It took Mags a moment to figure what was going on, and by then the bailiff and the Watch had separated the combatants and put them on opposite sides of the courtroom.

The judge looked on with a neutral expression, but then, he was used to eruptions in the courtroom. This was not a neighborhood where people came meekly into the court and calmly dealt with their side of an issue. It was only the first time this week that a brawl had interrupted things here, and there were still four days to go before the week was over.

By that point, Mags had gone from confusion to pity, because it was clear that the accused man was not at all right in the head. Whether he was born that way, or had been injured, he was, frankly, not fit to stand trial. But before he could intervene, the judge had leveled his gaze on Pellen.

“Cobber Pellen,” the judge said. “Where are your witnesses to this so-called attack?” The judge raised an eyebrow. “Because frankly, right now the man you say tried to harm you is acting more like the one who’s been beaten rather than the one doing the beating.”

Most helpful customer reviews

30 of 33 people found the following review helpful.

Well, it's not a BAD book....

By Sarah Lockwood Duggan

It's light, it's a little fluffy, it's a self-contained story, the characters are familiar. Having said all that, it's light. There isn't a lot of plot, but there is a lot of dancing around, the 'hey, let's find the troublemaker' (it's not a mystery, there's exactly ZERO possibility of figuring out who the heck the bad guy is) is a little too pat - I think Mags puts it best when he says that he's going to have to change his name to Mag Victim, or maybe Mags Hostage - C'mon Ms. Lackey, we've seen this. Ok, the character who's almost certainly Autistic is a nice touch (although spoilers prevent me from ranting about Amy and the connection - you'll know it when you hit it), but really, could you make the lower city speak any harder to follow? Frankly, it feels like Ms. Lackey is calling it in - from my perspective, I'd rather have a break in the Valdemar books and then something really solid, but obviously, that doesn't pay the bills.

And, although it's not part of the book directly - really Penguin??? \$12.95 for an e-book???? For 2 bucks, I'll take the hardcover, at least I have something physical.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful.

and this is reflected by the fact that my favorite moment in the book was Mags and Amily's wedding

By J. L. Gribble

This book had the awkward job of pushing along a trilogy plot that I don't quite understand and a relationship that is already solid. I keep reading Valdemar books because this world has such a special place in my heart, but at this point the drama and intrigue is no longer there for me in this particular section of the world with these particular characters.

I do genuinely still care about them, and this is reflected by the fact that my favorite moment in the book was Mags and Amily's wedding. But that's probably because I'm a sucker for weddings. Before anyone screams "spoilers!" at me, if you're reading the series, you already knew that this was a forgone conclusion four or five books ago. Every other moment of this novel faded into the endless descriptions of spying in Haven and court drama that has persisted for seven books by now. At this point, I am certainly reading for Amily's journey to become King's Own rather than for anything on Mags' part.

I think that the biggest problem with this particular section of the Valdemar series is that Lackey has been swept up in her own propaganda that Heralds are perfect. All of the conflict in this trilogy is completely external, and Mags and Amily find the perfect solution at the perfect moment every time. Right now, reading these books is like wrapping myself in a cozy blanket and having some tea on a rainy afternoon. Excellent comfort fare, but getting boring and predictable. Which is a shame, because I know that there is so much possibility elsewhere in the world of Valdemar (even for Heralds), and I know how good of an author Lackey can be.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful.

Sloppy work

By CL in Dallas

A decent story but it drives me crazy when a well know well established author gets sloppy with writing.

Example: two people are attacked and knocked unconscious in a well populated "safe" area in broad daylight. No explanation of how the attackers were able to get onto the palace grounds or even more importantly how they were able to move two bodies to a deserted location outside the city without getting caught. The Two people attacked are extremely well trained in unarmed combat but both were taken totally unawares? Plus their companions were also unaware of the attack or the kidnapping? The author deals with it by have the hero just wake up in a prison cell at the start of the next chapter. No explanation given. The author did the same thing in an earlier story. I can forgive it once but not multiple times.

It's still a good story and worth reading but be prepared for some holes in the plot.

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CLOSER TO THE HEART (VALDEMAR: THE HERALD SPY) BY MERCEDES LACKEY PDF

It's no any faults when others with their phone on their hand, as well as you're as well. The difference may last on the material to open **Closer To The Heart (Valdemar: The Herald Spy) By Mercedes Lackey** When others open the phone for talking and also talking all things, you could often open and read the soft documents of the Closer To The Heart (Valdemar: The Herald Spy) By Mercedes Lackey Certainly, it's unless your phone is readily available. You could additionally make or save it in your laptop or computer that reduces you to read Closer To The Heart (Valdemar: The Herald Spy) By Mercedes Lackey.

Review

Praise for The Collegium Chronicles:

“Thanks to court intrigues and an attempt by foreign infiltrators to trick Valdemar to its disadvantage, Lackey makes a real page-turner out of Mags’ and the collegia’s development.” ?Booklist

“For fans of her work, the return to the land of Valdemar and the continued tale of treasured characters will not disappoint?and new readers are likely to become devoted fans. Lackey has a playful writing style that is easy to become engrossed in.” ?RT Book Reviews

“Returning to her beloved Valdemar universe, Lackey opens her new series at a pivotal time in the history of Valdemar.... Series fans will enjoy the variations on a familiar theme, while enough information is presented for first-timers to discover a world of high adventure and individual courage. Highly recommended.” ?Library Journal

“Lackey has effortlessly returned us to the wondrous realm of Valdemar.” ?Night Owl Reviews

“As always, she tells an entertaining and enjoyable tale of Valdemar with characters we love and a world we’ll always want to visit.” ?Pop Culture Beast

“Closer to the Heart has the two things that have always made me love these books: a richly detailed history of the world, and beautiful writing.” —The Arched Doorway

About the Author

Mercedes Lackey is a full-time writer and has published numerous novels and works of short fiction, including the best-selling Heralds of Valdemar series. She is also a professional lyricist and a licensed wild bird rehabilitator. She lives in Oklahoma with her husband, artist Larry Dixon, and their flock of parrots. She can be found at mercedeslackey.com or on Twitter at @mercedeslackey.

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Technically, this was spring, but it certainly didn't feel like it. There was a definite bite to the air, and although there was no snow on the ground, the clouds looked as if they were contemplating dropping flakes any moment now. There was no scent of growing things in the air at all, only a vague dampness.

Herald Mags trudged along the street with his arms wrapped around his chest under his tattered cloak—tattered, because he was in disguise, coming to visit his little tribe of spies-in-training, in one of the poorer neighborhoods of Haven. The street was surprisingly smooth, but people did a lot of walking in this part of Haven, and this was also one of the older neighborhoods. There had been a couple hundred years' worth of patient, ill-shod feet wearing down the cobbles.

It was not, by any means, a bad neighborhood. For the most part, folks here were working poor, with honest jobs; the neighborhood itself might have fallen on hard times over the decades, but it hadn't turned into an absolute den of filth and thieves.

That was why the house full of orphans and cast-offs fit right in and caused no curiosity. The only real difference between "Aunty" Minda's houseful of discarded children and every other congregation of cast-offs around here was that Aunty Minda had the financial backing of the Heralds, so that they were guaranteed not to starve, go half-naked, or freeze.

Well, that, and the fact that they were right next to the "Weasel's" pawn-shop, and at the first sight or sound of trouble, one to three very large and heavily armed men would come rushing over from the shop to beat the living daylight out of anyone stupid enough to try and cause the little household grief.

The few people on the street were in just as much of a hurry as he was to get where they were going and into the shelter of four walls. Like him, they strode briskly, heads down, worn and faded clothing bundled tightly around themselves. Unlike him, they'd be fortunate when they got to their destinations to find any sort of a fire going. In this part of town, people generally couldn't afford a lot of fuel; they lit their fires only when they returned from work, and banked them as soon as they were ready to get under the covers in bed.

The street was relatively narrow, and the houses and shops were crowded closely together and on the dilapidated side. Most of them hadn't been repainted in decades, and although they were in repair, you couldn't exactly call it good repair; priority here was on keeping the building standing and the roof sound. After that, the landlords often left it up to the tenants to patch holes and repair shutters. The two- and three-story buildings crowded close together, sometimes leaning a little toward each other like whispering gossips. About half of them had a shop of some sort on the first floor, though many people, especially women, worked out of their homes—doing things like sewing, mending, and laundry. The wind that whipped down the street at him carried some of the scents of that business: cookshop aromas (redolent with the two staples of the poor, cabbage and onions), wet laundry, and beer. It was too late in the day for bread-baking, at least around here. The couple of bakers on this street baked their wares in the very early morning, so it would be ready to buy as people came out of their houses. The common breakfast around here was a hot roll, with a smear of fat, or jam, or for the most prosperous, butter or butter and jam. By this time of the day, the bakeshops were closed, except to serve people who had left their dinners to be cooked for a fee as the ovens slowly cooled. If your hearth was tiny, or you didn't have a hearth, or you lived alone but couldn't afford to eat out of a cookshop every day, that is what you did for dinner. You made up a pot of something and brought it to the baker as you left for work, and picked up your cooked dinner when you returned home. This was not the poorest part of Haven, poor though it was—those streets had the dubious distinction of being around the tanneries; where extremely cheap rents made up for the stinks associated with tanning leather. It was poor enough that quite often entire families crowded into a single room, or two and even three families shared a flat meant for one. The landlords didn't care how many people you squeezed in, as long as the rent got paid regularly.

Almost no one here owned the flats where they lived, unless they were the shop-owners, living above their shops. Shops in this street tended to stay open for as long as the owner could manage, or find someone to man the counter for him, since people here worked long and irregular hours. It wasn't uncommon to find a young child at the counter of many of these places, the offspring of the owner, learning the work of the business he or she would be inheriting by doing it.

It was only after dark—and in the summertime, well after dark—that these streets became dubious, even dangerous. Once the folks who worked for a living shut themselves behind their doors, the ones that lived in the shadows came out. After dark, when you heard shouts or noises, it didn't pay to be curious, unless you recognized the voice as that of one of the neighbors.

He was glad to reach the converted shop where his little horde of helpers lived, and even gladder to get the door open and pull it tightly shut behind him as a wave of welcome warmth struck him.

He turned and took in the room. He'd had the building gutted when he bought it; since then, he and Minda had taken on so many littles that he'd had a sleeping loft built around all four walls and a staircase to reach it. There were a couple of lamps up there, but nothing else but bedrolls and chests for clothing and trinkets. On the ground floor there were more bedrolls and chests, neatly stowed against the walls. There was only one real bed here, and that was the one reserved for "Aunty" Minda, who tended the children. There was a fireplace at the back of the room, nicely kitted out for cooking, and on either side of it, a row of buckets and basins for washing-up.

Two big kettles hung on hooks over the fire, both of them full of soup. Loaves of bread were waiting, stacked on a table beside the fire. Minda had the fires going briskly and the kettles pulled away from them so the soup didn't burn, as well she should, given the weather. She was virtually alone here at this hour, since her charges were all either at lessons or at work. Most of them were at work; most of them were messengers and delivery runners, installed at various taverns and inns around the city.

Minda was seated on a stool at the side of the hearth, stirring one of the kettles of soup. She rose to greet him; he was pleased to note that regular meals, reliable heat in the winter, rest, and the (relatively) easy work of mothering a brood of youngsters had vastly improved her health. She walked easily now, only slightly favoring knees that had been swollen from years of scrubbing floors. She looked like every other respectable lady around here; maybe cleaner than most, since she was fanatical about cleanliness now that she had the means to enforce it. Her woolen gown and heavy linen undergown were much mended, patched and faded, but not in tatters. Her kindly face was older than her years, but that was the case with just about everyone down here. "All the littles are out, Master Harkon," Minda told him—calling him by the name he used down here, Harkon, nephew of "Willy the Weasel," who owned the pawn shop next door. She knew his real name of course, but no one here used it. Minda called all the youngsters "littles," despite the fact that food and proper care had caused a few of them to sprout so fast they were as tall or taller than she was. And it was about three of those few he had come.

"I got it set up, Aunty," he told her. "Berk, Ray, an' yer li'l Sally'r set up t' go inter service up on th' Hill. I'll come get 'em termorrow, an' next week it'll be Starlin', Kip an' Jo."

Minda sighed, and looked both sad and relieved. "Well, th' bigger lads ain't gettin' th' work as runners so much," she admitted, "now thet they's tall as me. An' we're getting a wee mite crowded here. An' Sally'll be more'n a girl soon, an' ain't no place fer a girly wench here, 'mongst all these boys."

Mags nodded. Having a girl who'd begun to bud woman-bits in a ramshackle "household" full of boys was just asking for trouble. Younglings would go experimenting when urges started, after all. And more likely to go experimenting among friends. "Sally's t'be i' Palace itself. Gonna put her in trainin' as lady's maid, all

the airs and suchlike. She'll be mighty handy t'me in a year or so, an put up in a room full'f other liddle gels in the meantime, so safe as houses. She'll be gittin' a day off ev' fortnight t'run down here an' see ye."

Now Minda sighed with more than relief; she beamed to hear her "daughter" was going to be placed so well—though Mags never had learned if Sally was really Minda's offspring, or someone the woman had just swept up the way a motherly cat will sweep up any kittens left orphaned. Minda would never have been able to dream of the girl going into service in the Palace before Mags had come along. The most she would have hoped for would have been that Sally could find a place in the kitchen of a tavern, or as a serving girl in an inn. And that would have been if she'd been lucky.

"Th' lads 're all gonna be placed as hall-boys 'round the highborn houses. I'll be keepin' good track of 'em, an' I'll get 'em out if they're treated bad. They'll be damn useful, you bet. Hall-boys hear 'bout ever'thin'." Mags was particularly pleased about that. The job of the hall-boy was quite literally to stay in a little cubicle shrouded by a curtain just off the front hall and answer the door so that visitors were never kept waiting more than a few moments. For the extremely wealthy families where he was getting his boys placed, it was a matter of pride to have a hall-boy that did nothing but that, day or night. He answered the door, got names and rank, and ran to get the steward so the visitors could be properly attended to. The hall-boy would know the names, rank, and business of every single person that came visiting, and would certainly be able to pick up pretty much everything in the way of gossip that he cared to.

"Well, nobody could'a ast better nor that," Minda agreed, bobbing her head. "And t'ain't gonna be no harder work than runnin' messages all day." She took his elbow and drew him over to a second stool on the hearth. "Now. Let's hev us a bit uv gossip."

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Minda didn't have a lot of information for him, but Mags hadn't expected too much. Spring was the quiet season, at least until the Spring Fair. The highborn who only came to Court in the Winter were already on their way back to their estates, taking advantage of snow-free roads that were not yet axle-deep in mud due to spring rains. Merchants were busy planning their sales or purchases for the moment the weather turned warm. Farmers were hardest at work; it was already well into lambing season, and soon enough cattle and horses would start dropping babies. Anything that hadn't gotten mended over the winter would have to be put in shape to use once the ground softened enough to plow. Common folk were too busy at this season to get up to much mischief, and it was unlikely that his ears all over the city were going to hear anything. So what he got was a rough litany of minor affairs—what prosperous fellow was sending presents and messages to a lady who was not his wife, what major robberies had taken place and who the likely perpetrator was, who had been seen in places he ought not to be.

He waited until the younglings began trickling in, and gave his chosen half-dozen the good news as they stood in line to wash hands and faces. And they took it as such.

"Oh!" Sally cried, her cheeks turning pink with pleasure. "I am going to be trained for a lady's maid, then! I am so glad!"

Mags grinned; Sally was not only a bright little thing, she'd been making concerted efforts at "bettering" her speech and her manners, drilling herself as well as studying with the Sisters of Nanya, ever since he'd suggested he might be able to get her such a placing.

As for the boys, if their speech was a bit rougher than hers, that wouldn't matter at first; all that was asked of a hall-boy was that he be quick to answer the door, self-effacing, and able to pronounce names and say "yes, milord" or "no, milord," properly. They'd learn.

And all five of them had had occasion to see hall-boys at work, when Mags had sent them to various wealthy houses ostensibly delivering flowers or sweets at Midwinter. It was hard and often long work, since a hall-boy rarely had time off except to eat—but it certainly was easier than spending all day running messages or parcels all over town.

He gave the first three their letters of introduction and the directions to the Palace Gate and the Great Houses where they would present themselves, and drilled them in exactly what they were to say when they turned up at the servant's entrance as near to sunrise as they could manage. When he was satisfied they would make a creditable impression, he patted each of them on the shoulder. "Now, Sally, you're gonna be i' the Palace. I'll be findin' a way t' talk to you about once a week, but if you hear somethin' that's important, you find a way t' get to the kitchen of Herald's Collegium and talk t' the cook. 'E'll get me." As she nodded, he turned to the two boys. "You'll have a harder time gettin' away, so if you hear anythin' I should know, take this—" he handed each of them a ball of red string "—an' tie a piece t' a tree near the servants' door. I'll figger a reason t' come callin' as Herald Mags, and ye kin tell me what you've got then."

"You 'spect us to hear anything, Master Harkon?" Berk asked curiously.

"Honestly? Not really, no," Mags told them. "At least not 'til yer well settled inter your jobs, and they'll give you leave t' take an hour or two for yourselves now an' again, an' a regular day off. But I druther have a plan in place where you kin let me know we need t' talk, than have you learn somethin' then ruin all thet hard work I went to in order t' git you in place by having t' run off straight to me." He clapped both boys on the shoulders. "So concentrate on settlin' in, keepin' yer minds on yer jobs an' not on pretty chambermaids and handsome footmen, an' not getting sacked!"

All three of the youngsters grinned at him, but promised that they would do just that. For his part, Mags felt perfect confidence in them; they'd already shown they were sharp and clever. They were ready for this . . . and Minda was right. The little refuge was beginning to get a bit crowded. It was time for the first of the lot to move on.

And he already had some ideas in mind for the next batch, after these six were safely in place.

He took his leave of all of them, since it was about time for Minda to gather them for supper, and he didn't want to cut into their last hours with their friends. Wrapping his cloak tightly about himself, he left the converted shop and headed back to the inn where he had left Dallen. With the wind at his back, he wasn't quite so cold, and it gave him an excuse to walk briskly rather than sauntering as Harkon would have done in better weather.

Anyone with any sense was inside. This was no weather to linger on the street. Even if you didn't have much fuel and your walls whistled like a flock of birds with leaks, you were still better being inside than out. :Think they'll do all right?: he asked his Companion, as he let the wind push him back up the way he had come.

:Barring accident, they'll do splendidly,: Dallen replied. :And all three of them are quick; even if there is some sort of mishap, they're clever enough to think their way out of it again.:

•••

Council meetings, Amily had decided, must have been specifically designed to occupy as much time as possible for people who had a great deal of free time to spend. The participants seemed to delight in arguing over minutiae. Maybe things would change once better weather started, but right now the members of the King's Greater Council seemed disinclined to leave their comfortable chairs and the warm Council chamber.

On the other hand, the fact that they could spend entire candlemarks arguing over tiny things like whether the wool from chirras should be taxed at the same rate as wool from sheep or from lambs meant that things were . . . safe. Or relatively so. So. Small blessings. There was no war, not even rumors of war. Banditry was at a level where the local Guard garrisons could handle it.

After the near-riots at Midwinter, caused by the feud between the noble Houses of Raeylen and Chendlar, even perpetually disputing highborn families were keeping their quarrels confined to vicious gossip and cutting remarks. Street-brawls and threats of exile by the King had made their due impression on other feuding families, but what had really sent shock rippling through the Court was that the son of Lord Kaltar of House Raeylen had very nearly carried out a plot to murder all but one of the members of both Houses, marry the Chendlar girl, and inherit the lot. With all that to occupy them, most people were still chewing over the gossip-fodder.

And there were no more mysterious assassins sent by Karse scattered about the city. Large blessings.

“Perhaps,” she said gently, although she got their immediate attention when she spoke, “We should be looking at how rare this wool is, compared with mature sheep’s wool or lambswool, and tax it accordingly.”

She looked around at the circular table—circular, so that every member of the Greater Council could easily look into the faces of every other member, and no one could claim he or she had anything but an equal seat. All the faces that met hers wore relatively contented expressions, cementing her notion that the Councilors were mostly “arguing” for the sake of argument, and being in not-unpleasant company while being served the King’s best wine and manchet breads flavored with rose water. Not a bad way to spend a bitter afternoon.

“But what if the market becomes depressed by an excessive tax?” someone demanded, and they were off and running again, but this time at least the argument was getting somewhere instead of being an endless circle.

She was more than a bit gratified—who wouldn’t be—that now she was taken seriously in the Council meetings. Or seriously enough that when she spoke up, what she said was given due consideration. She’d been afraid that it would take years before she got even a fraction of the respect the Council had given her father.

Maybe the office of King’s Own Herald by itself brought along a basic level of respect.

:Or perhaps,: Rolan said gently into her mind, :They’ve been paying attention on the rare occasions when you speak up, and have learned that when you do say something, it’s worth listening to.:

:Or both,: she replied, successfully keeping herself from blushing. She wondered if her father had gotten this sort of encouragement from Rolan when he first became King’s Own.

It had been a long day, and she was just as glad that there was not an official Court dinner tonight. Kyril had made it quite plain that he intended to dine in his quarters with his family, which meant that only about half the members of the Court who were in residence would take dinner in the Great Hall. Those would be the members of the Court who had no residences of their own. The rest would return to their own fine townhouses here on the Hill for dinner, and possibly to entertain or be entertained. There could be music, informal dancing, and gaming. That meant she was free to have dinner with Mags, and they would probably do so with the instructors at the Collegium. The King only had Court dinners about once a week, although the Crown Prince and Princess, Sedric and Lydia, presided at Court dinners roughly three times as often. Lydia had told Amily that they did so in order to take the burden off Kyril, who frankly loathed the long dinners even more than he disliked tedious Council sessions. She couldn’t blame him. The Great Hall was huge, people had to talk so loudly in order to be heard that everything was a babble, and even with the best will in

the world, not every dish arrived at the tables better than lukewarm. It had occurred to her, more than once lately, that Kyril was looking . . . older. Not old, but older. The office was wearing on him.

While Father is actually looking younger. No longer having to juggle the dual duties of King's Spy and King's Own, now that he had completely recovered from what could only be described as "returning from the dead," Amily's father Herald Nikolas seemed to her to be reveling in the chance to get away from the Court and do things.

I certainly can't blame him.

On the other hand, these Council sessions were a unique opportunity for her to learn a great deal about the individual members of the Council. As long as she remained quiet, they tended to treat her as part of the furniture. It wasn't that they ignored her, it was more that they were used to her father, who had a very powerful Gift of Mindspeech, and could tender his advice to Kyril silently. They probably assumed she was doing the same, and it suited both her and the King to allow them to continue with that impression. Thus far she hadn't uttered so much as a single word during Council sessions that would make any of the members think she was challenging them, or even observing them with any attitude other than respect for their age and experience.

Which, of course, she was . . . but she was also weighing everything they said against what she knew were their own personal agendas and interests. Cynical perhaps, but Amily was a realist, and she had been observing these selfsame personages for years at the behest of her father, back when she was nothing more than quiet, unremarkable Amily, Herald Nikolas's crippled daughter, of no consequence whatsoever. Yes, they were all experienced. But they were also seasoned politicians and courtiers, and all of them had left defeated rivals in their wake. Now, they wouldn't be on the Council if the King and the Heralds didn't think they would keep the welfare of the Kingdom foremost in their minds. But there was no doubt that the continued accumulation of wealth and power lurked in the background whenever they came to a decision. As long as there was no conflict between these two motivations, Amily held her tongue. But she was always on the watch for a moment when the latter edged out the former.

Today had been one of those days. They all had commercial interests, whether it be mercantile or agricultural, or a combination of both, and edging the taxes one way or another could shift the balance of wealth and power around this table and around the Kingdom. It had been like watching people playing a card game for very high stakes.

The Crown Prince and Princess had sat in on this meeting as well, although they had not contributed anything to the discussion. She could tell from their expressions, however, that neither of them missed a thing—and it was very likely that tonight, at dinner in the Royal Suite, this entire meeting would be hashed out again between the soup and the dessert.

She was just as glad not to be a part of that. Going through it once was enough. Prince Sedric seemed to take a great deal of pleasure in this game of politics, though, and for that she was grateful. When—as she fully expected—the King stepped aside to allow his son to become the reigning Monarch, she was not going to have to educate him in a thing.

Nor Lydia, either. Like Amily, Lydia had been playing the quiet, unassuming observer at the behest of her elders—in this case, her Uncle—for many years. If Sedric knew the highborn players in this game intimately, then it was Lydia who knew the merchant "princes." Together they were going to make a formidable team.

And thank the gods for the greater favors. That barring a tragedy, we're going to get a pair like Lydia and Sedric as our monarchs when the time comes, and not a child.

That was the current situation in Menmellith, a Kingdom near Valdemar's southern border. The situation had been so precarious, in fact, that Menmellith had not sent an ambassador to Sedric and Lydia's wedding.

This, among other reasons, was why Kyril was pressing Amily and Mags to have their wedding soon. He wanted to make a state occasion of it, so that those foreign lands who had not sent a representative to the Crown Prince's wedding would have a second chance with a lot less international political pressure attached to the ceremony.

Politics. We can't even escape them when it comes to our personal lives. She sighed internally. Evidently, once one is King's Own, one doesn't actually have a personal life. No wonder father seems younger. I think I'm taking on all the years he shed.

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Mags and Amily both ended up at the Collegium dining hall late—so late that they missed all their friends and the instructors, and there weren't more than a handful of Trainees still there. He glanced over at her, thinking how serene and simply pretty she looked in her Formal Whites, and how deceptively unthreatening. She could have been any highborn girl; brown hair neatly braided and pinned around her head, big, soft brown eyes, delicate face—

—and he had seen her kill men, taking carefully placed, precise arrow shots. Not that he hadn't killed his share, and more, but he didn't look harmless, the way she did. He wondered if any of the Councilors ever thought of that, when they faced her across the table.

“Well, at least there ain't a crowd,” he said, watching the few Trainees desperately trying to combine eating and studying, and the Trainees on kitchen duty bustling about cleaning up. “We can always beg at the kitchen hatch for some crumbs.”

But they hadn't even picked a spot to sit before the Cook sent someone out with loaded trays for both of them.

Mags grinned and thanked the Trainee who handed them their dinners. “Bless you and Cook, and tell him I said so,” Amily added, and they took their food and found an out-of-the-way spot to enjoy their dinner in peace. One near the fireplace, and away from the windows. The ruddy light of sunset was not improving the bleak lawns and gardens outside.

“This weren't—wasn't—ever Collegium dinner,” Mags remarked, looking at the succulent roast pork, baked apples, and fancy-cut mixed vegetables. Not to mention the little pastries shaped like swans and filled with whipped cream with dollops of jam on top. The food looked and smelled heavenly.

“No, tonight was supposed to be stew,” Amily told him. “This is what went on the plates over at the Great Hall.” Then she considered the plates. “Part of what went on plates at the Great Hall,” she amended, and shook her head. “I should be used to it by now, but I still find it difficult to contemplate dinners that consist of a dozen courses or more. Our people make sure that nothing goes to waste, but the sort of excess that the highborn expect to see as a meal still bothers me.”

“I spent most've my life half-starved,” Mags reminded her. “I try not t'think on it too much or it'll make me mad. What goes back t'the kitchen after one Court meal'd feed all the mine-kids fer a month.” He shook his head, and dug in. “I expect the Cook sent over for a couple of plates and kept them warm for us.”

“Sometimes I suspect Cook of having a Foresight Gift.” The two of them ate silently for a bit; it had been a

long day for both of them, Mags suspected, although his had at least been spent in doing constructive things rather than sitting around a table and listening to Councilors argue.

Speaking of which. . . .

“I had me an idea,” he said, contemplating his pastry swan. It really did look too pretty to eat.

“Oh?” Amily clearly had no such reservations about her swan. She lifted it carefully to her lips and bit the head off. She looks so sweet, like a little brown coney, all big eyes and soft hair. And then she bites the heads off things . . .

Which, of course, made them perfect for each other. Just like his cousin Bey and his little assassin-trained wife.

:Dallen . . . sometimes I think I might be more like Bey than I’d like to think.:

:And this is bad, how?: Dallen replied archly.

:Point.:

“Well . . . you know how they’re tryin’ t’make a big thing over the weddin’. An’ you know how our lives go. An’ the chance fer a whole lotta things t’go wrong on the way is pretty high . . .” He raised an eyebrow at her; she sighed and nodded, and nibbled pastry.

“So, it occurs t’me . . . why not just run off some afternoon, an get married? You, me an’ yer pa so’s he don’t feel left out. We just won’t tell anyone else. That way, if ev’thing does go sideways, we’ll be married already anyway.” He looked at her expectantly. “Whatcha think?”

She stared at him for a moment. “I think it’s very clever!” she replied, much to his relief. “And I am all in favor of this plan!” She finished her swan thoughtfully. “The best thing is if we just wait until we both have several candlemarks free at the same time, rather than planning, because you know if we try to plan this, something will go wrong.”

“That’s a fact,” Mags agreed. “I’m mighty glad you think this’s a good idea.”

She smiled, which quite transformed her face from “quiet” to “lovely.” “I don’t think it’s a good idea. I think it is a great idea. Maybe I will stop having nightmares about things going wrong.” Then she made a little face. “Mind you, thinking of second-chance plans is much more entertaining than most Council meetings.”

He laughed. “Well, don’t let them know that. Oh, I got my young’uns coming up in the mornin’.”

She gave him a little sideways smile. “So, you insinuate your little spies in amongst the unwary then?”

“Better’n tryin’ to be twenty places at once, like your Pa did,” he observed. “Now, I know why he done things that way, but the way I figure it, when I start out with the young’uns, I know they’re gonna be loyal to me once they’ve growed up. So I don’ need to go huntin’ about for servants I can trust.”

She nodded. “And he never could devote more than half of his time to either job.”

“Too right.”

The Trainee who’d served them took away their empty plates while they sat together and discussed the

business of the day—or at least as much of it as either of them was willing to talk about in such a public place. Finally it dawned on both of them that they could do this much more comfortably and privately back in the quarters Amily occupied that had once been Bear's.

The walk to Healers' Collegium was more than a bit chilly, and the warmth of the hothouse that Amily was responsible for came as a relief. And it just seemed silly not to take the conversation to the most comfortable spot in the suite of rooms and then one thing led to another, and there wasn't much talking getting done for a goodly while.

"So . . . anythin' I really need t'know 'bout?" Mags asked into the soft dark.

Amily settled her head on his shoulder, and he pulled the blankets up closer around both of them. There was a very little light from the glowing coals of their fire, their featherbed felt very good after a day of walking all over Haven, having Amily cuddled in his arms was all he could have wished for and he would have been quite happy to never move again. Which, of course, was impossible, but it was a very nice thought.

"Kyril wants the wedding to be just after the Spring Fair." She sighed. He understood. She hadn't wanted their wedding to be turned into a spectacle in the first place, and having it right after the Spring Fair made him suspect the King planned to make use of some of the entertainers that would arrive for it. Then he sensed her smile. "But it won't be our wedding, will it? Just a kind of pageant where we are the chief actors. Meaningless, really."

He chuckled. "Ayup. An' we'll get all dressed up an' say our lines, an' if th' thing falls apart 'cause my cousin decides t'pay a visit, it won't matter a bit."

She laughed. "That's the spirit!" Then she stiffened. "You don't think Bey is—"

"No. Besides I ain't invitin' him." He mulled the situation over. "So, walk me through th' reasons."

"Kyril wants to make this another reason for gathering in important people in the Kingdom and ambassadors. Of course, Sedric's wedding was an occasion for that, but they were all rather preoccupied with it, and not with politics and negotiation and maneuvering. Plus, I wasn't King's Own then. That's the next reason, Kyril wants outsiders to think of me as innocuous. With attention fixed on me as a bride, people are more likely to dismiss me as not as sharp as my father. They'll underestimate me. The only people who need to understand just how sharp I am are the ones on the Council, but for anyone else, it could be very advantageous for me to be overlooked."

The fire popped a little, as Mags mulled all that over. He nodded thoughtfully. "That's all good reasons. Gotta agree with 'em. Even if I don' much like bein' trotted out an' put on show."

"Kyril had reasons for that, too. This is a good time for you to continue to create the impression you're good-hearted, solid, dependable, and a bit thick," she pointed out, and he had to laugh, because that was exactly what Nikolas had told him to do, back when he began learning the same craft that had made Nikolas the King's Spy.

"So I'm a bit thick, an' you're just a pretty thing at the King's side. Well, don' we make a likely pair!" He laughed harder as she gave a most unladylike snort.

"The more I think about running off and making the vows before a priest, the better I like the idea," she said after a while, just as he was drifting off to sleep. "The sooner, the better."

“Aight,” he agreed, and drifted away.

In the morning, Amily was already gone when Mags finally crawled up out of sleep. His dreams had been full of wedding nonsense—not nightmares, and not of things going wrong, but of nonsensical stuff. Like the King insisting that he and Amily get married on a platform built in a tree, or of Amily’s dress somehow being made entirely of bees. He couldn’t quite make out what had triggered that image.

Or Bey and roughly a hundred assassins turning up at the last minute to outline them in thrown knives as they kissed.

As he dressed, then made his way to the Collegium and ate, it occurred to him that he was not entirely happy with the King’s plan. The Spring Fair was not all that far away, and if the King intended to make some sort of enormous political and diplomatic event out of it, there wasn’t a great deal of time to get everything ready. . . .

He spooned up oatmeal loaded with chopped nuts and drizzled with honey, and considered all his options. Now, granted, Spring wasn’t a bad choice for this thing. After all, no one ever went to war in the Spring, or almost never. Spring warfare meant pulling your people away from their fields and flocks at the worst possible time. It meant that the area where you were fighting would be utterly ruined; fields trampled before seeds even had a chance to sprout, calving, foaling and lambing disrupted—and you’d have the devil’s own time trying to move herds with pregnant females and young animals out of harm’s way quickly. You went to war in the Spring and you insured that part of the country would starve, so unless that was actually your goal . . . it was a monumentally stupid idea, one that gained you nothing. If you lost, the local populace would descend on your country in an orgy of desperate looting in order to make up for their lands being ruined. If you won, you’d have to support a starving population.

And that didn’t even touch on trying to march and move and fight in mud, because the combination of Spring rains and newly plowed fields meant you would be up to your knees in mud. And so would your supply trains.

But Prince Sedric’s wedding had taken nearly a year to prepare, and even if this wasn’t going to be as elaborate, how would they ever have the time to get it all ready?

:You won’t,: Dallen admonished him. :The King wants this; the King will do the arranging, or rather, delegate people to make the arrangements for him. Remember what you and Amily agreed on last night; neither of you are under any obligation to concoct a “perfect wedding” for each other. It’s a show; just do your parts and let other people worry about doing theirs.:

:And if it all falls apart?: Mags could not help asking, although with a wry cast to his thoughts.

:Then as players ever and always do, we all blame the director. Who will probably be Lady Dia.:

Mags thought of that, as he got a plate of bacon and eggs and bolted it down. :I’d rather not. Lady Dia can be very . . . fierce.:

He had an appointment to meet Nikolas down at the shop, in their guises of Harkon and Willy the Weasel. The Weasel rarely put his head in at the shop anymore; it was understood that he was leaving the bulk of the work to his nephew and his nephew’s hired toughs, but it would have been altogether out of character for him to stay away entirely. Although the shop did the bulk of its business after dark, it was the Weasel’s way

to open it for a few hours in the morning, so that men who'd pawned their tools and had the money to redeem them could do so before hurrying off to a job.

This meant subterfuge, of course. Mags went down into Haven as a Herald, and left Dallen at the stables at a Guard post. Then he left the post by means of a tunnel under the street, and emerged in a back room at a tavern, where he became Harkon. Harkon staggered out, giving a convincing imitation of a man who had been drinking all night and needed to sober himself up before facing his uncle—stopping at a cookshop for a mug of tea so strong the spoon should have melted, at another for a second, not quite as strong, and at an apothecary for a dose of his “Sovereign Remedy.” By the time he got to the pawn shop, he was apparently sober enough to evade the Weasel’s wrath.

The shop was already open, and as Mags entered, a fellow in a carpenter’s apron was just finishing redeeming his tools. The man hurried out with a nod to the “nephew,” as Nikolas—aka “Willy the Weasel”—grunted and unlocked the door into the protected part of the shop.

Even if you had known that “Willy the Weasel” was the same person as Herald Nikolas, it would have taken a trained eye to see the Herald in the pawnshop owner. The Weasel’s greasy, graying hair straggled down his back in a most untidy manner, he had an unattractive squint, and his mouth was always primmed up tightly, as if he was afraid to give away so much as a word. If anything, the Weasel was very memorable, as opposed to Herald Nikolas, who was so very ordinary that if it had not been for his Heraldic Whites, he would have faded into the background of any crowd.

The shop was really two rooms; the front part held the bulkier, heavier, or more inexpensive items on shelves all around it; the back part, behind a wall so sturdy it could have been a jail cell, had a locked door and a barred window, through which the pawnbrokers conducted their business. That part of the shop held all the valuable stuff, and, of course, the cashbox.

“See, Stef turned up like ’e promised, nuncle,” Mags said, locking the door behind him and taking Nikolas’s place on the stool so that the “Weasel” could drop into a far more comfortable chair that stood behind it. :Have you been told about the circus we’re to put on?:

“Le’s ’ope ’is work’s more reliable this time,” Nikolas growled. “’E’s got ’alf ’is ’ousehold on our shelves. I’d be best pleased t’clear ’is trash out.” :I had breakfast with Kyril, so yes.: Nikolas shook his head imperceptibly. :I can’t make up my mind if it’s the idea of a genius or a disaster in the making.:

“Could use th’ space,” Mags agreed, carefully counting out the money in the drawer under the counter. This was routine. Every time someone new took over the window, he was supposed to count the money. :Amily and I decided last night that we aren’t taking any chances. We’re going to pop off quietly to a priest when we both have a free morning or an afternoon and just do the thing. We know half a dozen holy folk who’d tie the knot for us without a second thought, and neither of us care much who is the deity in charge. That way, when the disaster looms, at least we’ll already be shackled and it won’t matter to us if the thing falls apart, or gets stormed out of existence, or gets raided by bandits . . . or any of a thousand other things goes wrong.:

Nikolas blinked at him blankly for a moment, then covered it by half-lidding his eyes and tucking his chin down as if he was about to take a nap. :I take back everything I ever said about you being an idiot,: he replied, with a mental chuckle. :Am I invited?:

:How could I dare say no? I’m not anxious to be knifed in the dark by my father-in-law.:

A very faint chuckle emerged from the “drowsing” Nikolas. It sounded enough like a hint of a snore to pass for one. :Definitely not an idiot. I approve. And I take it we keep this a little secret amongst the six of us?:

Nikolas had included the three Companions, of course. It wouldn't exactly be possible to keep something like this a secret from them.

:It wouldn't do to disappoint Lady Dia and Princess Lydia,: Mags agreed. :Better to let them bask in the illusion that they're creating a perfect wedding for us. They'll probably wallow in it, actually.:

Nikolas chuckled again. :Considering that Amily's mother and I essentially did the same thing as you plan to—running off to a priest to avoid the hash that our two mothers were making, arguing over every detail, you are upholding a fine tradition.:

:Good to know. And speaking of “knowing,” what is it I need to hear?:

Mags spent the rest of his candlemarks, right up until midmorning (when the Weasel declared that keeping the shop open until “the lads” turned up to take it over after dark was a waste of time), trading information with his mentor. None of it was terribly important, but any part of it could become important. One thing Mags had learned above all else; when it came to being the King's Spy, the most unexpected things could turn out to be relevant.

As he and Nikolas locked up the shop, he saw Nikolas's head cock in that odd way that let him know that Evory was speaking to him. And at nearly that same moment, Dallen chuckled.

:Be careful what you ask for,: Dallen said. :You might get it. The King cut short the Lesser Court in order to see to some detail of the Treasury. Amily is free. You are free. Nikolas is free. And Brother Elban just down the street is tending his garden and is essentially free and of all the people you know who would do this thing, Brother Elban is your favorite. So. Would you like to get married?:

•••

It was with a feeling of profound relief that Mags kissed his bride under the combined (beaming) gazes of his new father-in-law, Brother Elban, Healer and tender of the little Shrine of Alia of the Birds, and three Companions.

He actually could not have planned this better. Everything had conspired to be perfect.

Elban was a lone cleric at his little Shrine; he didn't need much, just a room to live in and his garden. Alia of the Birds was a very minor Goddess, as such things went, with a tiny congregation and no real rituals of Her own. Her clerics were solitary, but not hermits; they dedicated their lives to healing and teaching the poorest of the poor. Several of Mags' youngsters took lessons with him. The Shrine occupied the same footprint as any of the houses or shops in this area; it consisted of a walled garden mostly planted with healing herbs, with Elban's little living quarters at the back. The walls of the garden and the dwelling were pleasantly weathered stone, a soft, pinkish granite. The statue of Alia, a motherly looking lady of middle age, with a round, smiling face and carved and real birds perched all over her, was made of a similar stone.

Within the shelter of the Shrine's walls, true spring had come early to Brother Elban's garden, lilies bloomed at the foot of Alia's statue, and the birds perched in the vines on the wall provided all the music they needed. He and Nikolas had detoured just enough to resume their identities as Heralds before meeting Amily here.

And the deed was done. They'd managed to get married without anything going wrong or interfering. Mags had never heard the wedding ceremony as performed by Alia's clergy before, but it had been lovely.

Now you will feel no rain, for each of you will be shelter for the other.

Now you will feel no cold, for each of you will be warmth to the other.

Now there will be no loneliness, for each of you will be companion to the other.

Now you are two persons, but there is only one life before you.

Treat yourselves and each other with respect, and remind yourselves often of what brought you together. Give the highest priority to the tenderness, gentleness and kindness that your connection deserves. When frustration, difficulties and fear assail your relationship, as they threaten all relationships at one time or another, remember to focus on what is right between you, not only the part which seems wrong. In this way, you can ride out the storms when clouds hide the face of the sun in your lives—remembering that even if you lose sight of it for a moment, the sun is still there. And if each of you takes responsibility for the quality of your life together, it will be marked by abundance and delight.

“Now, remember,” Nikolas reminded the beaming cleric. “Unless it is vital, no one is to know they are already wed.”

“Oh no, it would disappoint all those people who are likely planning a spectacle,” the thin little fellow replied, bobbing his head with understanding. He had no special robes; Alia’s clergy wore nothing more ostentatious than a long, brown tunic and trews, with a leather bird sewn over the heart. “No, we cannot possibly have that. It is not every day that the King’s Own gets married. People have expectations and we shouldn’t deny them their holiday, now, should we?” Then he beamed at them. “It will be our little secret.”

He let them out the garden gate, and Amily immediately swung herself up onto Rolan’s back. “I—”

“—have t’ get up the Hill, I know,” Mags finished for her. “Go. I’ll see ye at dinner if not afore. I got law-court this afternoon.”

“Don’t starve yourself,” was all she said, and then she and Rolan were trotting up the street and rounded the corner.

Mags looked to his mentor. Nikolas nodded in the general direction of a cookshop they both favored, and Mags grinned in agreement. He felt positively euphoric, actually, now that everything was settled. A weight had very much fallen from his shoulders, and it looked as if Nikolas felt exactly the same.

The explanation for that came only when they had finished their meal and were about to part company, with Mags going on to the law-court, and Nikolas to whatever mysterious errand would occupy him this afternoon. “Now if something takes me out of Haven, it won’t matter,” Nikolas sighed.

Mags nodded. “That be true,” he replied. “If somethin’ had called ye away afore the circus, Amily’d’ve been . . .” He groped for words.

“Very sad. Absolutely understanding, but very sad.” Nikolas’s normally inexpressive face took on a melancholy cast for a moment. “I have had to miss too many of the important moments of her life. I am glad I did not have to miss this one.”

• • •

Nikolas did not say where he was going, and Mags didn’t ask. This was not because they were ignoring the one cardinal rule of their occupation, which was always make sure someone knows where you will be. It was because Dallen had already spoken to Evory, and Dallen knew where Nikolas was headed. So that made two other creatures that knew exactly where Nikolas was going and what he intended to do, and that was enough.

Mags had quite enough on his plate with attending the Law Court; he didn't need to start fretting about whatever possibly dangerous place Nikolas was going to go.

Any Herald who was not already teaching at the Collegium—and truly, what was Mags actually qualified to teach?—was assigned to the Law Courts in various parts of the city. Prince Sedric was assigned to the Court Royal, which tried all cases that the lesser Courts passed to the higher, or those cases that were appealed. Not that many cases were appealed, because before one could appeal a case, all parties involved had to agree to re-testifying under Truth Spell in the Lesser Court. And was where Mags and the others came in, because in order to set the Truth Spell, you needed a Herald.

Mostly the Heralds of the Law Courts merely had to be present; a constant reminder that if the parties on either side or the judge demanded it, the Herald in attendance could set Truth Spell on any witness. Not the coercive version—although Mags could do that. Generally the coercive version of the Truth Spell was not needed in these simple trials.

This particular Court was in the same district as Willy the Weasel's pawn shop; the Guard and the City Watch here all knew Mags both in his guise of Harkon and as Herald Mags. That was useful, since they could arrange for trials where Harkon might be called in to identify someone who had pawned something to take place when Herald Mags was off-duty and some other Herald was taking his place.

Like most of the district, the courtroom and the building it was in had seen better days. Meticulously repaired and scrupulously cleaned, nevertheless, everything was old, worn, and a bit shabby. There were six benches for onlookers and witnesses, a table and bench each for the accuser and the accused, and at the front facing the rest, the judge's bench and the witness box. Then there was Mags' seat, at the back of the courtroom, off with the bailiff and a couple of Guards and a couple of members of the Watch who made sure things didn't get out of hand. The walls were whitewashed plaster . . . just a bit dingy. The furnishings were all dark wood that had long ago lost any semblance of polish.

Mostly, to tell the truth, Mags was just there for show, to remind the witnesses that they could lie under oath, but if they were challenged, they'd be caught at it, and might be in as much trouble, if not more, than the accused.

The courtroom was empty when he entered it, except for the bailiff, who greeted him like the old friend that he was by now, and offered him a mug of hot cider. Mags accepted it gratefully. The courtroom was cold and damp, and he kept his cloak on, as did the bailiff. There were fireplaces in the building, but none in this room.

"Seems like Spring ain't never gonna come," Bailiff Creed said, blowing on his cider before taking a sip.

"Seems like it's comin' too soon, iff'n ye ast me," Mags replied. "King wants me an' Amily leg-shackled after Spring Fair." He said this with a sigh, though inwardly he was chuckling. There was no time like the present to get the rumor-mill going. The less the general public knew about how things really stood between him and Amily, the better.

"Criminy! No more tom-cattin' 'bout fer you, me lad!" said the bailiff (who was, of course, married; the King encouraged marriage among the Watch and those of the Guard who were posted within the city as he felt it encouraged stability). Creed laughed, not unkindly. "Not that I ever heerd all that much 'bout you kickin' up yer heels."

Because I am very careful that my visits to my eyes and ears at the brothels are done by Harkon or some other rake-hell. "Nah, an' truth is, it ain't the bein' married, it's the mort've fuss an' feather of gettin'

married I ain't lookin' forrard to," Mags replied mournfully. "On'y good thing 'bout it is, I'm orphant, an' Amily's on'y got her Pa, so at least we ain't got two Mamas fightin' over weddin' thins."

"But she'll have a mort've friends makin' hay over this, you mark my words," Creed replied. "You're in for it, m'lad. Just smile an' nod an' say ever'thin' looks bootiful. An' if it's costly, make sure th' King's a-payin' for it." And at that moment, the Court began to fill up, which meant they both had to be on best behavior.

The first several cases were either quite clear-cut (the Watch having caught someone in the act of theft or mayhem)—or boring (quarrels between neighbors that had gotten to the point of being brought before the Court).

Then something came up that made both Mags and Creed sit up and start paying attention.

The first hint that matters were out of the ordinary was that a parade of five people trudged into the courtroom and took seats on the witness bench.

Then an enormous man was brought into the dock in irons that looked like dainty bracelets on his massive wrists. He was incredibly muscular, with muscles like a stonecutter or a blacksmith, taller than both the Watch that were with him, coarse features and a bald pate. And yet, the man's expression and body language were that of a terrified child.

The man's accuser came into the Court, and Mags took an instant dislike to him. Mags could read both his body language and his surface thoughts, and what he read proclaimed this "Cobber Pellen" to be a bully and a liar. He looked as if he was someone who was accustomed to take what he wanted from those who were weaker than he was. Once he had been muscular, but now he was going to fat, with a round head and features that could have been considered handsome, except for the petulance of the mouth and the ugly glitter of his eyes. Both accuser and accused were positioned in front of the judge, and the accuser was the first to speak, according to the rules.

"This animal attacked me without no reason yer Honor!" Pellen proclaimed. "It shoulda never been 'llowed on the streets! It shoulda been locked up years ago! It's dangerous! It nearly broke my arm!"

All the while Pellen was proclaiming how "dangerous" the huge fellow was, all the man did was cower—which was a strange thing to see from someone who looked as if he earned his living by throwing rowdies out of taverns. But all that Mags could sense was fear . . . fear, and confusion.

"And have you any witnesses?" the judge began, when he was interrupted by a shout from a ragged young woman who pushed her way into the court. Mags didn't get more than an impression of a wild mop of curly brown hair, a whirlwind of ragged skirts and shawls, and clenched fists, before she was already at the front of the courtroom.

"Cobber Pellen's a damn liar!" the woman shouted, and launched herself at him as if she was going to tear him to pieces with her bare hands. And the court erupted into chaos, with the Watch intervening between them, Cobber Pellen shouting one thing, the young woman shouting another, the five on the witness bench making a hasty exit from the room, and the bailiff trying to subdue Cobber as one of the Watch tried to subdue the woman.

Mags considered wading in himself, but decided instead to keep an eye on the accused.

Who was huddling in the corner, looking as if he was going to cry at any moment. There was something very

odd going on here. The surface thoughts of the poor fellow were in chaos, and it was as if every single thought had to fight its way through treacle to come to the surface. It took Mags a moment to figure what was going on, and by then the bailiff and the Watch had separated the combatants and put them on opposite sides of the courtroom.

The judge looked on with a neutral expression, but then, he was used to eruptions in the courtroom. This was not a neighborhood where people came meekly into the court and calmly dealt with their side of an issue. It was only the first time this week that a brawl had interrupted things here, and there were still four days to go before the week was over.

By that point, Mags had gone from confusion to pity, because it was clear that the accused man was not at all right in the head. Whether he was born that way, or had been injured, he was, frankly, not fit to stand trial. But before he could intervene, the judge had leveled his gaze on Pellen.

“Cobber Pellen,” the judge said. “Where are your witnesses to this so-called attack?” The judge raised an eyebrow. “Because frankly, right now the man you say tried to harm you is acting more like the one who’s been beaten rather than the one doing the beating.”

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